TOWARDS A LANGUAGE OF YEARNING: VIRGINIA WOOLF'S MODERNIST SUBLIME

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A Note on Abbreviations

Throughout this thesis, I use the following abbreviations to cite Woolf's works:

BA – Between the Acts. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1941.
M – Melymbrosia. Ed. Louise DeSalvo, Cleis Press, 2002 (first published in 1981).
Moments – Moments of Being. Ed. Jeanne Schulkind, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985.
O – Orlando: A Biography, Vintage Classics edition. Penguin Random House, 2016 (first published in 1928).
Pargiters – The Pargiters: The Novel-Essay Portion of The Years. Ed. Mitchell A. Leaska, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.
Room – A Room of One's Own. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963 (first published in 1929).
TG – Three Guineas. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006 (first published in 1938).
TTL – To the Lighthouse. Quality Paperback Book Club, 1992 (first published in 1927).
VO – The Voyage Out. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968 (first published in 1915).

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

"Then, for no reason that I know about, there was a sudden violent shock. [. . .] 'That is the whole,' I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower."

*(*Moments of Being, *71)*

A feeling of yearning permeates Virginia Woolf's oeuvre. We feel it in the waves that beat against the sides of the *Euphrosyne* in *The Voyage Out* (1915), when heroine Rachel Vinrace peers into the depths of the sea and dreams of a whole underwater world with "black ribs of wrecked ships" and "spiral towers" (27). We feel it, too, in *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), when our eponymous protagonist aches for contact with the "hard root of the oak tree," something solid that "he could attach his floating heart to" (9). And we certainly feel it when we read the epigraph above, and envision an ideal unity between flower and earth. Longing in Woolf's novels functions as a metalanguage which articulates a perspective of potentiality that informs Woolf's experimental artistic endeavors and her radical political vision.

Critics have already examined the dimensions of yearning in Woolf's work as a nostalgic pull backward.[1] A prominent feature of the modernist zeitgeist as a whole, this elegiac longing can be traced back to the wartime atmosphere that surrounded most of Woolf's lifetime. But fewer have considered the constructive, forward-looking dimension of this yearning, and the ways in which Woolf's aesthetic orientation towards possibility articulated the beating heart of her political ideology. This thesis aims to explore the potential of yearning in Woolf's work not as nostalgic, but as a positive push towards a future yet unknown. Given Woolf's fascination with and passion

[1] Rubenstein's "Fixing the Past: Yearning and Nostalgia in Woolf and Lessing," or Lisa Rado's dissertation, "A Failed Sublime: The Modern Androgyne Imagination."

for cycles of being—which I explore in these coming pages—I propose we turn away from the deadened leaves of autumnal nostalgia, and instead appreciate the spring blossoms born of Woolf's forward-looking yearning.

In her book *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde* (1950), Christine Froula locates Woolf and her English-modernist contemporaries within a worldview of "permanent revolution" whose ever-evolving, self-revising form mirrors the "unfinished and unfinishable struggle for human (including economic) rights, democratic self-governance, world community, and peace" (xi, xii). In my exploration of yearning, I want to keep this notion of perpetual revolution in mind. Its cyclical motions outline both Woolf's progressive activist struggles and the movements that characterize our lives more generally, which she sought to capture in her writing. This circular movement possesses a force that governs the individual and their day-to-day fluctuations through time, but also the macrocosmic workings of the earth and the universe. These natural rhythms, as we'll see, function in opposition to the linearity that Woolf's representations of civilization embody.

Nowhere does the aesthetic of cosmological-scale revolution express itself better than in the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse* (1927). A twenty-page "gust of lamentation," this portion of the novel encompasses ten years of narrative time, contrasting sharply to the two sections that precede and follow it—one hundred and twenty-four pages and sixty-four pages, respectively, both detailing a single day in the lives of the Ramsays (127). In "Time Passes," the Ramsays have abandoned their summer home while the carnages of war descend upon England and the European Continent. Yet the focus of this section isn't the Ramsays, nor is it the war; these subjects appear only as bracketed announcements,[2] in the peripheries of a narrative centered more

[2] In this timespan of ten years, three family members die, one of whom perishes in battle: "[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was

on the ravages of time and the seasonal changes of nature than the small, finite lives and affairs of humans. "Night after night, summer and winter," Woolf writes, "the torment of storms, the arrow-like stillness of fine weather, held their court without interference" (134). Forces of nature displace human activity that once gave life to the house, which only carries ghostly echoes of human life through the objects that remain: "What people had shed and left [. . .] those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated" (129). A vast and sweeping entity, nature gradually invades: "Flies wove a web in the sunny rooms; weeds that had grown close to the glass in the night tapped methodically at the window-pane" (132). The "Time Passes" section relies on disparity, and the eerie absence of human life becomes a backdrop for the pervasive presence of nature.

A dichotomy between civilization and nature then emerges, one which alludes to questions of longevity and human finitude. "Will you fade? Will you perish?"—this idea echoes intermittently through "Time Passes," as do notions about the human construction of time relative to an unceasing, "steadfast" nature (129, 126). "What after all is one night? A short space," Woolf considers somberly, a mere page before she announces the "rather sudden" death of Mrs. Ramsay—the center that held the family together, whose void-like absence the other characters will spend the rest of the novel trying to fill (127, 128). The prevailing force of this section is time, explored through the seasonal cycles of nature, enduring beyond everything—even death and war.

If we return to Froula's proposal that Woolf "inherited the Kantian idea of Enlightenment as unending struggle for human rights, self-governance, and peace in the name of a 'sociability' conceived as humanity's highest end" (2), then we can feel the reverberations of perpetuity expressed in the "Time Passes" section's emphatic cycles of nature: birth and death, growth and

instantaneous]" (133). The deaths of Mrs. Ramsay and Prue Ramsay also appear as single sentences, nestled between brackets (128, 132).

decay, rise and fall. I argue that Woolf's existential project of fulfillment— in her art as well as her political philosophy—depends on this perennial unattainability, a ceaseless longing for that which almost blooms but cannot. Froula characterizes the Bloomsbury project as one that continues the "Enlightenment struggle for civilization" into the twentieth century, through "its sense of history not as inevitable progress but as an unending fight for a future that is always open and free, and—most tellingly—its address to barbarity *within* Europe and the West" (xii). "Did Nature supplement what man advanced? Did she complete what he began?" Woolf writes in "Time Passes," questioning the relations between civilization and the environment (134). We see the impact of the West's belligerent impulses upon nature as Woolf describes a funereal, "ashen-coloured ship" that leaves a "purplish stain" on the sea "as if something had boiled and bled, invisibly, beneath" (133, 134). Though she grapples with understanding man as born of nature, she cannot reconcile man's destructive attempts to forge a linear path forward in the name of civilization. Juxtaposed with humanity's attempts to linearize history and construct a narrative of progress by which we may guide ourselves, Woolf's artistic impulse towards landscapes and seasons therefore reflects an opposition to the established modes of understanding upon which Western civilization was built. The yearning I identify in Woolf's work recognizes time and existence not as assured linear progress, but rather as sinuous waves that belong to a grander cycle. A dialectic emerges in Woolf's work between civilization and eternal nature which we may view from a political and existential perspective. In my thesis, I seek to understand yearning in Woolf's work as originating from this troubled dialectic.

But first, to better understand the relationship between Woolf's politics and her existential queries, we must examine the world that she and her fellow modernists inherited. The transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century was characterized by a rapid expansion of scientific,

social, and political boundaries whose changing parameters introduced a zeitgeist of anxiety and uncertainty. Not only did the world suddenly seem much larger, but the humans inhabiting it appeared much smaller. Holly Henry's essay "From Edwin Hubble's Telescope to Virginia Woolf's 'Searchlight'" demonstrates the profound influence that techno-scientific advances had on modernism. She describes Woolf's "awareness of, and response to, a public concern regarding a modern human rescaling," and this growing contemporary understanding of "humans' nonprivileged position within the frame of cosmological space and time" (140). Other advances also altered perceived relations between humans and the world around them. From Darwin's explorations of natural selection and evolution to Einstein's theories of relativity, the advancements of science weakened confidence in established forms of knowledge and organization, leaving the West vulnerable to other technological and sociopolitical changes. In Great Britain, the advent of mass-production techniques during the second industrial revolution spurred the widespread implementation of communication and transportation systems like the telegraph and railroad. These technological developments in turn facilitated an extraordinary movement of people and ideas, which simultaneously accelerated globalization and aided Britannia in its colonial project. But the West's push for imperial expansion in less developed territories of the world generated political friction within the Continent and beyond—leading to outbreaks of conflict and, eventually, two World Wars.

This confluence—of scientific discoveries, global conflicts, and changes in the ways that individuals could relate to each other—led to a deterioration of certainty, a loss of faith in old systems of thought, from which modernity was born. But while much of modernism was characterized by a disenchantment with established institutions and hegemonic ideas— patriarchy and gender constraints, religion, class systems, to name a few—Mia Carter and Alan Friedman

describe a "dark side of modernity," too, "an outgrowth of enduring aspects of certain pernicious and constricting Victorian mores" (3). Scientific progress initiated a retreat from internationalism and an advance towards imperialist and fascist ideals, including racism, eugenics, anti-Semitism, and sexism, which nation states attempted to justify through appeals to scientific authority. Despite regressive strains of thought, much of modernism embraced newfound existential freedoms, concentrating on issues of identity and subjectivity as it sought a definite break with the past.

Disconnected from the foundational institutions and ideals of the Victorian era, but not yet certain of the shape of the future, English modernists found themselves adrift on waves of uncertainty and unknowability. Woolf weaves these contradictory rhythms into the coming-of-age narratives of her protagonists in *The Voyage Out* and *Orlando: A Biography*, creating currents of longing that dislocate the characters in spatial, temporal, and historical ways. In my thesis, I propose that Woolf introduces two different dimensions of yearning that both confound *and* propel development in these novels: an identity-specific *gendered* yearning and a general *existential* yearning that all her modernist-verging protagonists contend with. The former exists as a response to the constraints imposed upon individuals in hegemonic societies. In the patriarchal-imperial Victorian setting of *The Voyage Out*, Rachel's yearning becomes *gendered*: her bildungsroman is characterized by an increasing desire to escape from the limitations of conventional gender roles and heteronormative relationships. This form of yearning perhaps connects most distinctly to the nostalgia that other critics have contended with. Its constraints retain the customs of an anachronistic world, which clings to a semblance of hierarchical organization that once gave order to life. But this longing for the past appears misplaced in Woolf's narratives, which otherwise verge on discovering new worlds, new ways of being. The latter type of yearning expresses this ache for expansion. It attempts to unite the fragmented "self" to the "whole" of being in what I

conceive of as a more universal experience of longing. Where existential yearning seeks to expand, grow, and connect in a direction that is boundless, gendered yearning seeks to rupture and push beyond strict social boundaries.

The aesthetic of the sublime, borrowed from the nineteenth-century Romantics, anchors Woolf's exploration of these two types of yearning. Just as Woolf grounds her politics in the resurrected Enlightenment ideal of a "permanent revolution," so too does she find aesthetic inspiration in the Romantic emphasis on subjectivity as it relates to the surrounding world. Incorporating the Romantic reverence for nature and its ability to imbue "astonishment," Woolf crafts her own modernist sublime through the landscapes of her novels. I argue that the "purpose and vitality," which Woolf tries to reclaim from the Enlightenment project (*Bloomsbury Avant-Garde*, xii), finds expression through the inexpressible vastness of Romanticism's mountains and skies, oceans and valleys.[3] This form of the sublime embeds a symbology in the natural landscape, which then creates a dialogic experience between reader and text grounded in the emotional associations evoked by nature. In *The Voyage Out*, for example, waterscapes serve as a symbol of existential potentiality. Oceans and river passages literally enable the progression of Rachel's bildungsroman, but aquatic imagery is also linked to psychic exploration and probes of the imagination. As the novel progresses, we begin to envision waterscapes as channels of possibility for Rachel, forming the associations that articulate Woolf's symbology of yearning towards a progressive future. *Orlando*, by contrast, employs the landscape as a continuity of being against the sweeping, changing zeitgeist of English history, structuring a symbology of landscape as enduring perpetuity.

[3] One direct example of Woolf's use of the Romantic sublime appears in Holly Henry's analysis of Woolf's short story "The Symbol." Henry explains that the mountain in this narrative "becomes a symbol for the fragility or ephemerality of human life" (146).

Other critics have contended with Woolf and the sublime relative to ideas of gender, Otherness, and genre conventions. Lisa Rado's dissertation comes close to my fusion of the sublime and yearning, but her "failed sublime" is predicated on a negative yearning for the past. "Inheriting from the Romantics the ache for the sublime encounter," Rado writes, "many modernists on the one hand reject such an experience as philosophically and poetically untenable in their new cultural landscape while nevertheless being drawn to it nostalgically" (17). While Rado's "failed sublime"[4] holds some merit, it does not address the ways in which the changing techno-cultural landscape invigorated the modernist sublime. Holly Henry's discussion of the impact of telescopic technology and cosmological discoveries on Woolf's own aesthetics and politics reflects this modernist sublime. Henry details the pervasiveness of contemporary cosmological discourse during Woolf's time, and highlights Woolf's own fascination with the cosmos.[5] She then discusses the ways in which Woolf "position[s] her characters against the infinite vistas of the universe" in order to explore human time, and the simultaneous potential and fragility of human life. Telescopic technology expanded Woolf's existential perspective to encompass the nebulous cosmos in a manner that reflects the Romantics' appraisal of vast natural landscapes. Moreover, as Henry argues, Woolf utilizes contemporary technologies as impetus for a new "dramatic narrative style" that demonstrates to readers a perspective "beyond the rhetorics of nationalism and the necessity of war" (138, 150). Such an artistic rendition of scientific technology reveals a more complex relationship between Woolf and her cultural landscape than what Rado proposes. While Woolf's creative endeavors often mourn the past, they do not lament

[4] Rado's understanding of the modernist sublime as a failure stems largely from her positioning the sublime within modernism's fascination with androgyny, and authorial attempts to "incorporat[e] the construction of the opposite sex within the creative self" (16). Claiming that these authors fail to "survive" their sublime encounters with their androgynous selves, Rado then concludes that the aesthetic project was unsustainable.

[5] To name some examples that Henry evinces: Woolf had access to a telescope courtesy of her friend and lover, Vita Sackville-West, and later obtained her own telescope; she was exposed to the popular cosmologist James Jeans's writings and BBC lectures; she witnessed a solar eclipse in 1927, which she recorded in her diary.

or resist the future, but rather look for ways to actively engage with the uncertain entities that shape the present.

I spend most of this thesis mapping the intersections of identity-specific gendered yearning and general existential yearning in Virginia Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*. In this novel, Woolf lays the groundwork for the connections between identity, hegemony, and nationhood that sustain the existential and political questions which characterize her entire literary career. As I trace what I define as the corrupted bildungsroman of Rachel Vinrace in part one of this thesis, I explore Woolf's search for a mode of storytelling that diverges from the traditional male-dominated genres of English (and Western) literary history. These tentative probes for an alternative literary tradition reflect Woolf's desire for a change in the dominant sociopolitical ideology, and her embarkation upon a quest to initiate that change through fiction. In part two, I discuss the ways in which *The Voyage Out* connects to Woolf's most gender-progressive novel, *Orlando: A Biography*. By juxtaposing these particular novels, I hope to connect the potential embedded in Woolf's first radical heroine to the liminal protagonist and indefinable narrative of *Orlando*. I conclude this project by briefly touching on the end of Woolf's career, with her radical pacifist-feminist essay *Three Guineas* (1938) and her last novel, *Between the Acts* (1941). Though my focus is primarily on gender/sex issues and patriarchal hegemony, which remains specific to Woolf's contemporary world, this thesis attempts to draw attention to the inextricable relationships between the individual and the world around her—or, as Virginia Woolf thought of it, the flower and the earth.

PART ONE

"Where the sky met the sea"[*]

Virginia Woolf's first novel is a pastiche of genres. *The Voyage Out* (1915) begins as a Victorian sitting-room drama that merges into the cross-Atlantic excursions of an adventure novel. Woolf sets her young heroine Rachel Vinrace onboard the *Euphrosyne* in a journey of supposed education and self-discovery that echoes a coming-of-age narrative. Rachel lands on a small seaside town in the uncharted landscape of South America, where the caricatured cast of characters—ranging from stuffy Victorians to Edwardians-verging-onto-modernity—settle into the airless, proper Victorian world of the Austenian family drama. In Austen's tongue-in-cheek portrayals of the sitting room, characters are intentionally presented as cardboard-cutout types who evoke and satirize a specific well-to-do English atmosphere. With these mismatched genres as the novel's backdrop, Woolf teases forward a seemingly straightforward bildungsroman. We follow Rachel through fits and starts of epiphanic moments—her reading of Henrik Ibsen, fleeting musings, and budding romance with Terence Hewet—feeling all the while that we are building towards something, edging towards a final climax, only to watch painfully and helplessly as Rachel succumbs to a fever after a jungle expedition.

Although the novel's ending is unsatisfying and initially mystifying, a further examination

[*] In this section, I quote both from Woolf's officially published novel *The Voyage Out* and *Melymbrosia*, Woolf's first completed draft of the novel, which was revised extensively in 1912 to "blunt the clarity and savagery" and "make her meanings more ambiguous," according to Louise DeSalvo (*M,* xxii). My reasons for treating the two versions as one coherent novel echo Christina Froula's in "Out of the Chrysalis," where she states that much "valuable material was submerged in the transformation of *Melymbrosia* to *The Voyage Out*" (89, footnote 17). The former provides supplementary insights to its finalized companion that are instrumental to my own reading as well.

of Woolf's manipulations of genre unravels the tightly wound mystery of the bildungsroman's unexpectedly arid resolution. Woolf's essay "Phases of Fiction" (1929), first published as three parts for *The Bookman*, demonstrates her interest in the evolution of literary genres and her rigorous examination of the brushstrokes that painted each form. Woolf admits to the informality of her analysis; she does not follow a methodical overview of the history of literature-at-large or even English literature specifically, but rather traces the path of her own literary tastes, "independent of time and reputation" (123). Her chosen authors and works include English, French, and American writers—though her analyses focus more on the great English writers.[6] Her developmental appraisal of the novel form may lack method, but it retains an analytic rigor and ability to identify each stylistic epoch.

Woolf's sharp categorizations of writers and her understanding of their creative work as directly responding to previous generations relays her own perception of genre as a living, evolving thing—one that involves the reader's pursuance of that natural "design that has been traced upon our minds" (123). She connects each isolated phase through the reader and her changing preferences; the reader's feeling of absence—of missing something in each reading experience—guides the progression of the novel form, serving as an impetus for transformation in literature. For example, as she transitions from "truth-tellers" like William Defoe to Romantics like Ann Radcliffe, Woolf describes how the reader may "become aware of another desire welling up spontaneously. [. . .] A desire for distance, for music, for shadow, for space, takes hold of us" (128). Written over a decade after *The Voyage Out*, "Phases of Fiction" nonetheless reveals a segment of Woolf's penetrating mind as it dissected the elements that made fiction work. Through this essay, we may discover not only her acute awareness of the mechanical workings of genre and

[6] Some English authors she discusses in "Phases of Fiction" include Anthony Trollope, Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, and Jane Austen.

style upon our minds, but also her prioritization of the reader's perspective in sustaining the novel's effectiveness. As we'll see in this thesis, Woolf's manipulations of genre require the reader's understanding and participation to work as intended.

In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf relies heavily on reader expectations, and her distortion of established genres reveals her preoccupation with uncovering a new literary direction to express the probing, uncertain nature of her modernist understanding of the world. In her manipulation of genre, Woolf subverts reader expectations that were conditioned by centuries of English literature's dominant traditions—male-governed conventions that were closely linked to and expressive of the heart of an English hegemony predicated on patriarchal-imperialist ideals. Taken separately, genres in *The Voyage Out* signify a continuation of the most beloved elements of English Victorian culture—the enduring family dynamic, as signified through the Austenian caricatured characters and sitting-room setting; the conquering spirit of Defoe's adventure novel; and the solidity of traditions, expressed through the Dickensian bildungsroman. But together, these genres create a confounding maze that the reader can only navigate to a limited degree through expectations, since Woolf does, after all, ultimately challenge these genres. The assumptions of other genres only bring the reader as far as recognizing the English world reflected in the beginnings of the narrative, background, and setting. Woolf's subversions of these genres, however, leave the reader suspended in a narrative they can no longer make sense of. The only elements that the reader can hold on to—the familiar power structures and dynamics of stories that reinforce patriarchy—become those that derail the narrative to begin with.

The Voyage Out aspires to penetrate the farcical core of social organization, to expose its absurdities, and reveal on the distant horizon a tantalizing alternative set of values to those of Victorian culture. Though some critics have dismissed the work for lacking the same distinctive

modernist sensibilities that her later novels possess, scholarship on *The Voyage Out* is at last acknowledging the novel's subversive modified replications of English literary foundations. To deconstruct the predominantly male literary traditions that restrained modernist thought (and especially female modernists), Woolf first had to situate herself within the anachronistic architecture that existed. My analysis focuses particularly on Woolf's revision of the bildungsroman, a genre that was prevalent in English literature and Continental European literature as well.

First coined in the twentieth century, the term "bildungsroman" combines the German *bildungs*, meaning education, and *roman*, or novel, to describe a narrative whose focus is on the moral, spiritual, and psychological developments of a young person as he comes of age. I use the pronoun "he" intentionally; the bildungsroman, like most other genres and stories, was intended as an expression of the male experience. Franco Moretti touches on the inherent exclusiveness of the bildungsroman, citing "wide cultural formation, professional mobility, full social freedom" as elements of the genre that give the "west European middle-class man virtual monopoly" (ix-x). "Without him, and without the social privileges he enjoyed," writes Moretti, "the bildungsroman was difficult to write, because it was difficult to imagine." The coding of this type of story as "male" also finds its roots in the differing expectations that cultural practices imposed upon men and women. Summarizing the work of Mircea Eliade and other scholars in the introduction to her essay "Out of the Chrysalis," influential Woolf scholar Christine Froula considers the dichotomy of male and female initiation rites in the context of Victorian society,[7] noting that the point of divergence begins with the response to the mother figure. The boy separates from the mother so

[7] These initiation rites are preserved in other societies and epochs beyond the English Victorian era, but Froula's work is contextualized within this culture and time period for the sake of connecting these initiation rites to Woolf's novel specifically.

he may be inducted into the "culture of his fathers," while the girl confirms her likeness to her mother through the menarche and "prepares her for the domestic and reproductive roles of wife and mother" (64). Through this socio-anthropological lens, we may see how the male's story necessarily eclipses the female's. Where society demands that the male actively participate in the traditions built for him, it dismisses the female to a finite world—the home—and confines any development to that which is useful for the fulfillment of domestic roles. As the editors of *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (1983) write in their introduction, "even the broadest definitions of the bildungsroman presuppose a range of social options available only to men" (7). It is therefore crucial to read the bildungsroman as male-coded, because Woolf utilized and sabotaged the classic structure of this genre precisely to expose its inherent repetition of male hegemony.

Woolf's manipulation of the coming-of-age narrative as a literary device that conveys social disruption and disorder is not new, especially in the context of the modernist zeitgeist. As Moretti pinpoints in his book *The Way of the World* (1987), these changes in the European literary tradition of the bildungsroman begin at the end of the eighteenth century. "When status society starts to collapse," observes Moretti, "the countryside is abandoned for the city, and the world of work changes at an incredible and incessant pace, the colourless and uneventful socialization of 'old' youth becomes increasingly implausible: it becomes a *problem*, one that makes youth itself problematic" (4). Thanks to "the new and destabilizing forces of capitalism" and coupled with the "unexpected hopes" generated by a liberating unpredictability, these powers give rise to mobility and interiority—the new identifiers of youth.

However, Moretti separates the English tradition of the bildungsroman from its European brothers, identifying the English bildungsroman's "stability of narrative conventions and basic

cultural assumptions" as an abnormality within the larger Continental genre (181). By revisiting the coming-of-age narrative, Woolf therefore positions her protagonist within a literary structure that has historically grounded the English and reinforced their worldviews. The narrative of *The Voyage Out* at once recalls the stability and solace that the English bildungsroman maintained; but Woolf's intentions of subversion fall more in line with the European renditions, which unsettle and displace readers. In this balancing act between the bildungsroman that the English cherish and the Continental one of instability and incoherence, Woolf not only unveils that the current cultural framework no longer functions, but implies that it is a framework which must be demolished entirely—not merely revised—in order to reflect the transforming zeitgeist of modernism.

This implicit censure of the dominating literary form also reflects Woolf's broader attack against the hegemonic ideas that reign over Victorian culture at large. Jed Esty examines this criticism in his book *Unseasonable Youth* (2011) and further unpacks Moretti's analysis by exploring the "symbolic function of nationhood" in the modernist bildungsroman (4). Esty argues for what he terms "frozen youth": a key feature of the modernist bildungsroman, characterized by thwarted "attainment of a mature social role through plots of colonial migration and displacement" (2). Characters in these stories tend to "die young, remain suspended in time, eschew vocational and sexual closure, refuse social adjustment, or establish themselves as evergreen souls" (3). This re-imagination of the genre not only unmoors the "inherent conventions" of a society, but also effectively disrupts the historical continuity of the nation "in order to criticize bourgeois values" and "to explore the contradictions inherent in mainstream developmental discourses of self, nation, and empire" (3). Rachel's death, as Esty notes, serves a "null function" in the novel that "throw[s] into relief [the bildungsroman's] masculinized and nationalized concepts of destiny" (129).

Other critics have written similarly about Woolf's unconventional appropriation of the

bildungsroman. Playing off of J. Halberstam's concept of "shadow feminism," Anne Cunningham deems Woolf's first novel an experiment in what she calls "negative feminism," a "failure-based aesthetic" that "enact[s] an alternative model of feminine subjectivity" which "critiques normative prescriptive codes" (180). In "Out of the Chrysalis," Christine Froula concurs that *The Voyage Out* is a "challenging and transformative critique" rather than an accidental failure of plot. She writes that "Woolf's first gropings towards her novel suggest her ambition not to create a heroine whose individual life story would make her an exception to the rule but rather to create a fictional world in which the plot of marriage and motherhood governing female destiny might itself be challenged and changed" (67). My analysis combines Esty's considerations of genre and the notion of transformative failure propounded by Cunningham and Froula. I use the phrase "corrupted bildungsroman" to refer to Woolf's feminist revision of a historically male-centered genre. As we'll see, the corrupted bildungsroman becomes a stage on which the conflicting modes of gendered and existential yearning vie for the protagonist's attention.

I. A Cartography of the Female Bildungsroman

To replace the traditional sitting rooms of Austenian family dramas, Woolf recreates Victorian mores and social structures in the liminal spaces of the *Euphrosyne* and then the Santa Marina hotel. Though the transience of the journey itself provides the liminal, floating doorway through which Rachel may take a tentative step of exploration, Woolf importantly grounds the narrative in a recognizable, domestic literary structure: the English sitting room, both as a setting and a genre. A foundation that reassures the reader through familiar reconstructions, this device incites a parallel with other middle-class female protagonists—Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet or Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, for example. But Woolf later undermines and confuses this solid footing as she pushes Rachel's story beyond the boundaries of the genre. In the coming pages, I explore the drawing-room genre as a middle-class female version of the bildungsroman, where the woman's coming-of-age narrative depends on her social education and a period of courtship before the consummation of her "development" through marriage. I then consider Virginia Woolf's revisions of the genre—through structure, narration, and representation—including how these manipulations follow and subvert the formulas laid by the genre and her predecessor, Jane Austen.

Confined to the domestic sphere and its small conversations and conflicts, the sitting- room drama is the only literary convention before the twentieth century that middle-class women writers like Austen or Brontë could situate their female protagonists within. Woolf demonstrates the reasons for this limitation in her "Speech of January 21 1931," an elongated version of "Professions for Women" that appears in the reconstructed novel-essay portion of the novel that became *The Years* (1937).[8] In this section, she likens the female novelist to a fisherwoman, using her fishing

[8] For more on *The Years* and Woolf's repurposed hybrid novel-essay project, see the epilogue.

rod to "[let] her imagination down into the depths of her consciousness while she sat above holding on by a thin <but quite necessary> thread of reason" (xxxviii). Woolf describes how the novelist's "imagination had floated limply and dully and lifelessly upon the water," and the subsequent argument between imagination and reason. "What on earth is the matter with you?" reason asks imagination, to which the latter replies, "You should have given me more experience to go on. I can't do the whole work for myself." This allegory illustrates the ways that women's lack of professional experience may impact their creative work.

To be sure, bourgeois dynamics allowed women more access to education than their working-class counterparts,[9] but no real professional autonomy was afforded to Woolf's "daughters of educated men." Men controlled the politics, science, and culture, leaving middle-class female authors lacking in the experiences necessary to create fictional worlds outside of their estates. In other words, while male writers were free to stroll down any avenue of interest, female writers were discouraged from even leaving the home. Anything outside the domestic sphere—including literary ambition—distracted from family-rearing duties. The limited narrative possibilities available to well-to-do heroines—governess, courtship, marriage, children—therefore reflect the woman writer's inability to participate in real society.[10] Class status is a factor that further complicates the marginalized experiences and representations of womanhood. Woolf

[9] Though Woolf's interrogation of the applicability of the term "bourgeois" to women in *Three Guineas* is very interesting: she argues that "it is grossly incorrect to use [the word] of one who differs so profoundly in the two prime characteristics of the bourgeoisie—capital and environment" (172). Her statement requires context for full appreciation, as it serves to bolster the materialist critique of her essay, but this snippet displays the depth of Woolf's perspective on class and power.

[10] To be sure, women of the laboring class could be written a little bit differently: Charles Dickens's Nancy is an implied prostitute who associates with violent criminals; Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders a servant-turned-widow seeking financial stability for her and her children; Thomas Hardy's Tess Durbeyfield a milkmaid who loses her virginity outside of marriage. These female character portrayals—all written by male authors—each present their own problems, but my aim in describing them is to draw attention to class status as impacting narrative possibility. (We may notice, however, that working-class heroines run into the same problem of narrow story arcs that the bourgeois heroines find—arcs defined either by marriage or sex.)

ascribes crucial power to financial independence: "If one has five hundred a year there is no need to tell lies and it is much more amusing to tell the truth," she writes of her own position as a middle-class female writer (xxxi). Woolf keenly perceived the advantages and boundaries of her socioeconomic status, and struggled against eclipsing the working-class woman's perspective.[11] Accordingly, this thesis focuses mostly on Woolf's own class—the "daughters of educated men." My feminist analysis in *The Voyage Out* emphasizes the experiences of middle-class women like Woolf, whose life trajectories were burdened with the pressures to redirect energies towards the maintenance of the family patriarch and his children.

To better understand Woolf's contributions to the drawing-room genre, we must turn to one predecessor of the novel form, whom Woolf studied extensively and called "the most perfect artist among women": Jane Austen ("Jane Austen," 183). Woolf's rendition of the sitting room is indebted to Austen's own satirical portrayals, which, according to Woolf, fixed upon that which is "eternally laughable in human nature" and elaborated it through the cardboard-cutout-like characters who are "permanent features of every ballroom" (171). Critic Mark Wollaeger also observes Austen's influence on Woolf. "How does a young woman establish her own authority in a public sphere dominated by powerful male voices?" Wollaeger considers the beginning of Woolf's career (37). He then postulates, in his essay titled "The Woolfs in the Jungle," that Woolf mediated between Joseph Conrad and Jane Austen as Woolf searched for a literary tradition outside of masculine authority and beyond the limited female perspectives previously recognized.[12] Indeed, as Woolf searched for the literary mothers that she could "think back

[11] In *Three Guineas*¸ for example, Woolf attempts to include the proletariat woman in her essay while refraining from necessarily speaking *for* her. She criticizes the daughters of educated men who "play at belonging to the working class and adopting its cause," and adds that "it would be interesting to know what the true-born working man or woman thinks of the playboys and playgirls of the educated class who adopt the working-class cause without sacrificing middle-class capital, or sharing working-class experience" (*TG*, 209).

[12] Wollaeger also makes an argument that Woolf's relationship with Leonard Woolf "deepened her ambivalence

through" (*Room*, 76), Austen's "whip-like phrase[s]" and her emphasis on the "ebb and flow of ordinary existence" provided fertile source grounds for the experimental novel of social criticism that would become *The Voyage Out* ("Jane Austen," 176, 178).

In the novel, Austenian wit and incendiary comedy of manners serve as one narrative voice throughout. "Each of the ladies, being after the fashion of their sex," Woolf observes sharply, "[were] highly trained in promoting men's talk without listening to it" (*VO*, 17). Through this wry humor, Woolf critiques and infiltrates the absurd core of the drawing room's rules of conduct just as she constructs them. Even the conversations the narrator relates to the reader expose the anachronistic workings of the characters' minds. This technique, too, was borrowed from Austen; in her essay "Jane Austen," Woolf describes how Austen mostly let her character "rattle on" from their perspectives, only occasionally "strik[ing] one note of her own, very quietly, but in perfect tune" (178). In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf aims for a similar balance between her Austenian narrator and the tedious conversations of characters like Mr. Pepper and Mr. Ambrose, or the guests who idly play cards in the Santa Marina hotel.

In this social setting, Rachel is introduced as "her father's daughter"; she is held captive by the expectation that she "must be in some sort prepared to entertain [the Ambroses]" (*VO*, 14). But there is something different about Rachel—though she is a "nice strange creature," there is no denying: "she looked wild" (*M*, 11). This description of Rachel, pulled from Woolf's first draft of the manuscript, suggests that Woolf envisioned Rachel's spirit as more rebellious than she appears in the novel's published version. Rachel may perform her role instinctively, but her mind is absent

towards powerful male authorities, making her highly sensitive to writers such as Conrad" (37). Many scenes, Wollaeger critically notes, were "radically revised" after Woolf's honeymoon with Leonard—chief among them the jungle scenes and movements upriver (36). Wollaeger ventures towards a biographically driven criticism in this claim, and though it may or may not hold water, my focus is not on theorizing about Woolf's novels on the basis of her personal details.

from and apathetic to her surroundings. Other characters perceive her as unintelligent, childish; Helen assumes that interactions with Rachel "would make no more lasting impression [on her] than the stroke of a stick upon water" (*VO*, 20). However, Woolf's first iteration of Rachel's character in *Melymbrosia* reveals that though "her eyes were unreflecting as water," a depth persists beneath that opaque surface (21). Compared to the subtle, ambiguous depictions in *The Voyage Out*, Woolf's social critique in *Melymbrosia* was blatant and merciless,[13] and as a result, Rachel is written as much more vocal, exasperated, and impatient with her surroundings. In one scene, Rachel chats with Mr. Pepper and he begins waxing poetic about roads—Woolf's symbol of civilization. "'Do you realise what an important thing a road is?'" he asks. To this, Rachel responds with idle derisiveness: "'Begun by rabbits, they were continued by men'" (*M*, 22). In *Melymbrosia*, Rachel's disinterest in the empire-building patriarchy evinces itself through her snappy dialogue and frequent daydreams. But in *The Voyage Out*, robbed of verbal language and doomed to stutter through conversations, incapable of expressing her thoughts, Rachel may appear more naïve.

Yet Woolf still subtly displaces Rachel, signaling her status as an outsider. She notes "an approaching physical discomfort" that begins to intrude upon Rachel's consciousness, much like "a tight shoe or draughty window," as she prepares to entertain her aunt and uncle as a formal hostess (*VO*, 14). Through Rachel, we perceive the stifling artificiality in the atmosphere. Though she tries in earnest, her behavior is still "unnaturally braced" to entertain guests (14). Other characters also notice the inadequacy of Rachel's façade: "Rachel was perhaps too still for a hostess," Helen thinks, "she might have done something with her hands" (17). The Rachel Vinrace

[13] The novel's satire was so biting that Woolf's cohorts, after reading this draft, advised her to tone down and mask the criticisms, for the sake of her budding career.

of *Melymbrosia* is a quixotic insurgent, fighting what she calls the "Great War" "on behalf of things like stones, jars, wreckage at the bottom of the sea, trees stars and music, against the people who believe in what they see" (*M*, 38). But this Rachel is too radical, so Woolf transforms her instead into a victim—a voiceless martyr whose fate is to search for language in a social landscape raucous with meaningless chatter, but devoid of meaningful communication.

A narrative tension surfaces between Rachel's development and the stale social backdrop. The parts of the novel that take place in a sitting room—surrounded by the idle prattle of well-to-do men and women—are the least interesting portions of the novel (but often the most hilarious!), and intentionally so. Woolf flits from Austen's satirical sitting room to Rachel's disconnected but emotively and intellectually charged fantasies, and with every glimpse into Rachel's abundant, expanding interior world, we ache for more of this alternative narrative that Woolf dangles before us. With this shift in focus, Woolf signals a desire to pivot away from her Austenian influence, towards uncharted territory.[14] Because Austen's novels always end within the parameters of what's expected of women in society—marriage—Austen ultimately upholds the status quo and its regressive patriarchal traditions even as her satire offers sharp critiques.[15] The satire is insightful, but proposes no alternative or follow-up to combat these faulty institutions.

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[14] It's important to note that Woolf borrowed more from Austen than the satirical technique and drawing-room setting, though in this section, I only delve into those two elements. In her writings on Austen, Woolf repeatedly emphasizes Austen's masterful use of the "trivialities of day-to-day existence," the "parties, picnics, and country dances" ("Jane Austen," 178). "There is no tragedy and no heroism" in Austen's works, yet according to Woolf, Austen was capable of "endow[ing] with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial" ("Jane Austen," 174). In *Three Guineas*, this fixation on minutiae—through the form of footnotes and obscure historical details—comes to signify the lost storytelling tradition of women. Woolf aims, through the trivial and day-to-day, to illuminate the untold stories of women and articulate an innately female perspective on life. I discuss this further in the epilogue.

[15] One could argue, of course, that Austen's position as a woman in the eighteenth century was much more cornered than Woolf's in the twentieth century. Woolf had the privilege of working in an epoch where women's rights were no longer on the far edges of society. In Woolf's lifetime, after all, Englishwomen finally received the right to vote (though admittedly, women's suffrage was not secured until 1918; Woolf by then was about thirty-six, and it was three years after the publication of *The Voyage Out*).

This difference in objective propels Woolf's technique in a radically different direction. As Woolf begins to probe through Rachel for another world of expression, Austen's ghost can only do so much. Indeed, after the Dalloways[16] come and go in a glamorous procession of Victorian etiquette and power dynamics, we feel somewhat tired of the charades. The blandness of the sitting room contrasts sharply with Rachel's dynamic enigmatic thoughts—interjected by Woolf as fragments, cut-off portions of speech, and strange unprovoked reveries in the middle of the day. The conversations around Rachel become meaningless fillers as we wait for Rachel's next string of blooming thoughts and wonder: What will this youth transform into? With Rachel, Woolf tries to break out of the sterile, controlled world of Jane Austen—where all quantities are known, the ending is expected, and in the interim Austen can then playfully satirize people and landscapes while always returning to what the audience expected. "But was she not sometimes tempted to trespass for a minute?" Woolf wonders of Austen ("Jane Austen," 180). "Was she not beginning [. . .] to contemplate a little voyage of discovery?" *The Voyage Out* embarks on that journey, defiantly rupturing the conventions of the literary drawing room, moving beyond Austen's thought-provoking satire.

As she abandons Austen's narrative voice, Woolf ventures further into the fringes of the world, exploring perspectives of periphery rarely represented in fiction and progressing towards a transformation of the novel form. In one scene, Rachel and Helen, bored of the men's conversations, venture out on the deck of the ship. The men continue talking in the dining room, and Woolf describes the scene from the voyeuristic perspective of the two women, who now stand outside and peer in "through a chink in the blind," thereby mirroring the not-so-far-off culture of

[16] Richard and Clarissa Dalloway, transient guests on the *Euphrosyne* who come onboard while the ship is docked in Portugal and depart again once they've arrived at the next port, are "the very incarnation of 'London,'" as critic Lisbeth Larsson writes (27). They are wealthy cosmopolitans, enamored with empire and very conservative. For more on the Dalloways, see sections II and III of part one.

exclusivity that once forbade women from pursuing formal education and even entering libraries (18).[17] This outsider's vantage point quickly transforms the situation, giving the men inside rougher, somewhat sinister qualities; as Rachel and Helen first leave the room, they hover momentarily "at the doorway"—another liminal space—and observe "Mr. Pepper as though he had suddenly loosened his clothes, and had become a vivacious and malicious old ape" (17). Then, as the women watch the men through the blinds, they appear still more crude and harsh: "Mr. Ambrose throw[s] himself violently against the back of his chair, while Mr. Pepper crinkled his cheeks as though they had been cut in wood" (18). The Victorian homosocial rituals embedded in the exclusive world of higher education are literally impressed upon the bodies of these men. But from the perspective of the women who witness these men, we feel only estrangement and alienation as we watch this contrived echo chamber.

The stark contrast between the stillness of the "dry, yellow-lighted room" that the men inhabit and the frenzy of the ocean that the women are subjected to on deck further emphasizes a separation between the world of men and women (18). While the forceful display of nature is so powerful and rousing that even Helen is "suddenly overcome by the spirit of movement" (18), the male characters appear much more fixed in their surroundings. "Mr. Pepper and Mr. Ambrose were oblivious of all tumult," Woolf writes (18). The insulated room is a small slice of England, whose warm lights ironically bathe ignorance over the men, keeping them safe from having to venture out beyond their comforts. The men, for all intents and purposes, are frozen in time: "they were in Cambridge, and it was probably about the year 1875." With this combination of location and date, Woolf summons a not-so-distant epoch where women were barred from the high

[17] These perspectives on the margins, though restrictive, may offer a different kind of knowledge, Woolf suggests in *Three Guineas*. She writes that "through fathers and uncles, cousins and brothers, [women] may claim some indirect knowledge of professional life," and can improve upon this knowledge "by peeping through doors, taking notes, and asking questions discreetly" (61).

education system in England. The first learning institution in the United Kingdom to admit women was London University in 1878—three years after the date Woolf names above.[18] But Woolf also specifically mentions the illustrious Cambridge, which actually didn't open its doors to women until the following century (Picard). Together, these details recall a regressive time period that, though legally eradicated, still remains a part of Woolf's present zeitgeist—enlivened by a lingering sense of male entitlement, but also encouraged by the endurance of social structures that uphold male supremacy.

The private world of the sitting room and the public sphere thus begin to converge in *The Voyage Out* in a manner that anticipates the connections Woolf would flesh out in *Three Guineas*. In the former, Woolf offers us snippets of systemic exclusion on a level that is at once confined to one story and emblematic of an entire community of individuals that represent England on a smaller scale. And as previously discussed, her first version of the novel, *Melymbrosia*, appears even more clear-sighted. But these versions of her first novel still mostly reflect the world as Woolf and other women like her saw it—that is, through the chink in the blinds of their Victorian homes. Rachel's story expresses Woolf's vision as she saw it from the heart of the private sphere. *Three Guineas*, as we'll see, lays bare the patriarchal threads that link the public world, and radically complicates its connection to the private world as articulated in *The Voyage Out* and *Melymbrosia*.

[18] Two colleges within the university welcomed women—Bedford College, and the Royal Holloway College, which was opened by Queen Victoria in 1886 (Picard).

II. Waters of Possibility: A Symbology of Landscape

Woolf transforms the natural landscape of *The Voyage Out* into an abstract symbology that simultaneously communicates to the reader and Rachel, thereby giving voice to the charged tensions between Rachel and her social environment. To the reader, this language of association defines the ideological chasm separating Rachel from the sitting room. But to Rachel, the untouched natural landscape carries echoes of her own budding thoughts, which are so far from the reality of human society that they are verbally inexpressible and must find voice in experiences of sensation. Rachel's acute sensations of the world around her bring readers closer to the feelings of yearning embodied by the landscape—by the depth and breadth of the ocean, for instance. In this section, I focus on Woolf's rough bifurcation of land and sea, or the solid and the fluid, before concentrating specifically on the fluid and its relation to Rachel's characterization and development. By plumbing the natural landscape for its perceptive, olfactory, and tactile qualities, Woolf summons the aesthetic tradition of the Romantic sublime.

Some critics have already examined Woolf in relation to various theories on the sublime. Daniel O'Hara's book *Virginia Woolf and the Modern Sublime* returns to the "sublime tribunal" that Greek writer Longinus pondered in the first or third century A.D. This theory of the sublime would become the springboard for philosophers and writers in the eighteenth century, who became fascinated with the concept and quickly developed their own ideas. Lisa Rado's dissertation, "A Failed Sublime: The Modern Androgyne Imagination," combines the theories propounded by Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and Longinus. Other critics have tweaked their interpretations of Woolf and the sublime to reflect their respective schools of thought, such as Jane Marcus's "democratic feminist 'collective sublime'" ("Thinking Back through Our Mothers," 10). As

Samuel Monk points out, "the course of the sublime never did run smooth, since at any moment a writer might seek to deny validity to all that had been written and thought on the subject, and to revert to older ideas and tastes" (qtd. in Rado, 134). But for the purpose of my thesis, I work primarily with the ideas of Edmund Burke.

With respect to the tradition as manipulated by Woolf, I define the sublime as both the Romantic aesthetic—which is closely tied to images of nature—and a state of mind that transcends immediate reality, expanding instead towards a potentiality of unknown proportions. In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf employs the Romantic sublime as a device through which Rachel may come closer to the exulted consciousness that is the sublime state of mind. By connecting Rachel's feelings of yearning to the ocean and other bodies of water in this section, I demonstrate the function of Woolf's sublime symbology in the context of a broader existential perspective. Through this symbology, Rachel temporarily attains a psychic sublime, which this thesis refers to as a "moment of being," borrowing Woolf's own terminology. In her autobiographical essay "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf does not explicitly define her notion of a moment of being, but instead shapes an ontological meaning for the phrase through sensual descriptions of emotionally charged memories. I return to this term later, in order to position it alongside the temporary existential discoveries of Rachel's corrupted bildungsroman.

Let us now turn to Woolf's utilization of the natural landscape through the sea-voyage trope, a narrative device that communicates the differences between Rachel and those around her. Framing Rachel's bildungsroman through the voyaging structure of the adventure-novel genre, Woolf creates an unstable and uncertain narrative that exposes the limits of English national identity and attempts to explore female subjectivity as it exists within the empire. In the context of Britain's unsurpassed naval power, whose supremacy lasted nearly two centuries, the passage-at-

sea narrative encourages a plot of self-mastery and arouses pro-nationalist sentiments for an empire on which the sun never sets. But Woolf's female protagonist is immediately excluded from this genre of exploration and conquest, for reasons previously discussed. As we board the *Euphrosyne* and move farther out into the ocean, we, too, are denied the empowering, reflective gaze of a man embarking on a journey for his homeland.

Instead, Woolf offers us the perspectives of two "outsider" females: Rachel and Helen. While Mr. Pepper and Mr. Ambrose comfortably sit inside, the women step out on the deck to observe their native England on the diminishing horizon:

> London was a swarm of lights with a pale yellow canopy drooping above it. There were the lights of the great theatres, the lights of the long streets, lights that indicated huge squares of domestic comfort, lights that hung high in air. No darkness would ever settle upon those lamps, as no darkness had settled upon them for hundreds of years. (*VO*, 17)

This description of London's industrial, metropolitan ambience reflects the rapid technological advancements of the late-nineteenth century that swallowed the country in a surge of imperial-capitalist expansion. The lights blanket the city in "huge squares of domestic comfort" that at first inspire confidence in the women. But the tone of near-reverence rapidly shifts to one much more foreboding and fatal as Woolf writes, "It seemed dreadful that the town should blaze for ever in the same spot; dreadful at least to people going away to adventure upon the sea" (17– 8). The drastic change in perspective offered by the ocean transforms the "great manufacturing place" of London with "its electric lamps, its vast plate-glass windows all shining yellow" into a "circumscribed mound, eternally burnt, eternally scarred" (12, 18). The permanence and solidity of London's great civilization becomes irreparably disfigured by those same markers of industrialization that vitalized the city. Great dotted lights that once indicated scientific progress and economic growth now destroy the city in Helen and Rachel's eyes, implying an awakened

disenchantment to the signifiers of imperial-capitalist expansion.[19] But only by boarding the *Euphrosyne* and distancing themselves from the "fine yellow fog" that chokes London do these female characters—finally "free of roads, free of mankind"—begin to perceive this different representation of their beloved empire (13, 27). Thus, though the voyaging structure and its aqueous setting initially prompts identification with Britannia's superior command of the seas, Woolf utilizes the trope to instead emphasize displacement within the empire. Juxtaposed with the view of a receding London charred by its own lanterns of civilization, the journey at sea ironically serves as a channel through which old worldviews are questioned—and even abandoned—while new perspectives find life.

In some ways, Woolf's employment of the sea in this first novel anticipates what Nicole Rizzuto terms the "aqueous imaginary" of Woolf's later experimental novel *The Waves* (1931). In her essay, Rizzuto examines the tensions between two disparate representations of the sea as facilitator of empire-building and as a circular, timeless force of nature that endures beyond historically specific moments. According to Rizzuto's analysis, Woolf structurally circumscribes the "linear narrative of individual and imperial-national development [. . .] within a wider process whose spatiotemporal motion is circular, not linear, and which is portrayed as preceding and outlasting human existence" (277). Although Rizzuto briefly glosses over Woolf's portrayals of the sea in *The Voyage Out*, she summarily dismisses the waters therein as "a silent medium, trope, or backdrop that sets into relief apparently more fertile semiotic fields: the island, town, or city

[19] This rousing new perspective hints at the challenges posed to the identity of white English liberals under an imperial nation, and predicts the elegiac novel that Woolf would write to purge herself of these conflicting feelings: *The Waves* (1931). As Jane Marcus notes in a chapter of her book *Hearts of Darkness: White Women Write Race* (2004), *The Waves* unequivocally "announce[d] the end of civilization" (21). Nicole Rizzuto complicates this pronouncement in her essay by examining the way the novel's structure and imagery at once invokes Britain's maritime power and stymies it by circumscribing its linear narrative within the circular, and therefore eternal, nature of the waves. According to Rizzuto, "*The Waves* closes not by unequivocally supplanting the conventional view of Britain's rule of the waves with an unconventional one but by rhetorically balancing them" (289).

that skirts them, the vessels that cross them" (269). The waters of *The Voyage Out* do not formally structure the novel as they do *The Waves,* but this appraisal fails to recognize the way that Woolf saturates her first novel with the aqueous, connecting its fluid and expansive properties to Rachel's quest for fulfillment—and her very being.

Nevertheless, Rizzuto's work importantly calls attention to Woolf's preoccupation with the relationships between civilization, nature, and time. In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf articulates this anxiety from the suspended vantage point of outsiders to English society. The liminality of the ocean liberates Rachel and Helen, whose vision of London reduced to a burnt mound raises questions about the lifespan of empire and the viability of its sustaining mechanisms.[20] Discussing Woolf's disruptions of the traditional bildungsroman in *The Voyage Out*, Jed Esty points out that the novel "puts pressure on the progressive logic of the genre, suggesting that it is not—or perhaps no longer—possible for subjects and nations to come of age in smooth, harmonic, morally affirmative lockstep" (140). Indeed, this scene unearths an irreconcilable distance between empire and the subjects it marginalizes. It is a perspective that at once implies that Rachel has no homeland to return to at the end of her voyage—thereby foreshadowing the irresolvable nature of Rachel's journey—and prophesies the decline of a sociopolitical system that constrains its citizens instead of benefitting them.

Because Woolf portrays the aqueous as a boundless, formless entity that "exceeds the logic and laws of individual proprietorship and national sovereignty that control firm land" (Rizzuto 272), characters' responses to the sea become the litmus test for gauging the differences in sociopolitical ideologies and relationships to the British Empire. Woolf notes that despite all the life and energy expressed by those on land, "very few people thought about the sea," because "they

[20] Jed Esty also comments that this section of the narrative "establishes both the spatial crack between nation and empire and the ethical crack between culture and commerce" (138).

took it for granted that the sea was calm" (*VO,* 31). A bifurcation emerges between the solid and the fluid that corresponds with the level of national pride and identification that a character feels. Those entrenched in the heart of life in the empire rarely consider what goes on beyond it, but more than that, they are unprepared when they do encounter it. As glamorous caricatures of the Victorian gender ideals and eager cogs that "seemed to come from the humming oily centre of the machine" of empire (47), Richard and Clarissa Dalloway do not fare well on the journey at sea, both catching heavy bouts of seasickness despite the fact that they get on late and jump ship early. "With their mindless, pompous nationalism and upper-class conceit," the Dalloways are the "very incarnation of 'London'" (Larsson 27); their essences are not built to withstand the instability of the ocean. And indeed, Richard and Clarissa "can't help thinking of England" (*VO,* 50).[21] While Richard is onboard, he constantly "pass[es] over the waves, still [seeking] the land meditatively" as he contemplates his political duties to his homeland (62).

As we've similarly witnessed, intellectual patriarchs like Mr. Pepper and Mr. Ambrose, simply remain indoors and retreat to their makeshift world of Cambridge. Though the storms of the sea have the potential to unsettle the characters, turning them into "atoms flying in the void," most are ultimately unchanged; once the storm abates, so too does "the mind of men, which had been unmoored also, once more attached itself to the old beliefs" (72). Woolf thus politicizes the landscape: colonized land and metropolitan cityscapes signify regressive mentalities, while aqueous and otherwise wild, uncultivated spaces—such as the jungle—beckon towards the possibility of social and psychic worlds beyond this one.

Woolf's characterizations of Rachel as an aquatic being, with eyes "unreflecting as water"

[21] "'Being on this ship seems to make it so much more vivid—what it means to be English,'" Clarissa tells her husband. "'One thinks of all we've done, and our navies, and the people in India and Africa, and how we've gone on century after century, sending out boys from little country villages—and of men like you, Dick, and it makes one feel as if one couldn't bear *not* to be English!'"

(21), combine with Rachel's mesmerized responses to the tumultuous, fluctuating movements of the sea to articulate a relationship between our proto-modernist heroine and the unstable, indefinite, and uncontainable nature of the fluid—a connection which further reinforces the progressive and revisionary goals of Woolf's conceived protagonist. In "Out of the Chrysalis," Christine Froula writes of Helen's first impressions of Rachel as "a watery being that culture, language, writing leave no mark upon" (69). Although Froula does not linger on Helen's impressions, she does summon forth an instrumental observation about the essence of Rachel's ties to water imagery: they remind us that Rachel is intrinsically a being that does not belong to the Edwardian era in which her body is confined, and moreover, that on some level the residual, regressive Victorian culture cannot penetrate to the core of Rachel's being.

Rachel's fluidity marks her as an outsider in a way that also allows her to evade the solid, set-in-stone sociocultural rules and constructions of her contemporary world. When Rachel notices her aunt and uncle step a few paces away to share a kiss, she quickly turns her attention to the depths of the sea to isolate herself and resist this manifestation of heterosexuality, which Rachel subconsciously knows relates to domestic and biological gender dynamics. As she tries to peer beneath the ocean's surface, to the inscrutable "green and dim" abyss below, Rachel imagines "the black ribs of wrecked ships, or the spiral towers made by the burrowings of great eels, or the smooth green-sided monsters who came by flickering this way and that" (*VO*, 27). Rachel fleetingly escapes to what Froula calls "her underwater life alone [. . .] where she practices and reads, falls asleep and daydreams, lives an elaborate, solitary fantasy life" (69).

The fantasies of Rachel's psyche in turn reflect her struggles against the confines of patriarchal culture and language. Most notably, Rachel's vision of a "Great War," fought on behalf of drowned things, "wreckage at the bottom of the sea" (*M*, 38), attempts to create a space for all

those things that are rejected from the hegemonic culture at large, and to protect the outsiders that society tries to suppress. Froula similarly interprets this war as a "vigil of what has been repressed from language, history, and consciousness, and [. . .] lost origins" (70). By arguing that Rachel mourns the lack of a culture she can call her own, Froula draws attention to patriarchy's absolute, inescapable reign, and hegemony's capacity to silence other narratives through a denial of their expression or documentation. According to Froula, Rachel can be read as a sea monster of sorts, exemplifying the "buried lives that women lead in male culture" (69). Through this imagined underwater world, Rachel creates a space for individuals like herself, who must either sublimate their selves to the ruling hegemony of society or float on the edges of the culture in perpetual precarity.

However, Rachel's retreat to this underwater life signifies more than passive mourning of a battle already lost or a rag-tag assemblage of society's outcasts. The mere image of a "Great War" asserts a masculine-coded belligerence, a readiness to fight back and preserve what one believes in. While Froula's reading of the novel illuminates the aqueous as an elegiac space, she assumes that Rachel has already given up. I argue instead that Rachel actively fights against patriarchal domination for much of the novel, arming herself with the indefinite properties of the fluid in response to a limiting and solid masculine world. Waterscapes guide Rachel, allowing her initial access to her abstract visions of the world and providing respite from the Victorian sitting-room culture that bores and stifles her. The liminal exploratory nature of the ocean and the river[22] encourages Rachel to distance herself from place, time, and history—to free herself of the constraints of corporeality—and instead penetrate the deeper psychic spaces of her mind. Aqueous imagery always accompanies Rachel's probes of imagination and unreality, particularly ephemeral

[22] When she travels through the South American jungle, Rachel must traverse a river. Because the jungle scene is a watershed moment in the narrative, the river cannot be overlooked as a facilitator of this fatal scene.

states caught between consciousness and unconsciousness, including fantasies, sleepy daydreams, and—at the end of the novel—her fever state.

In one scene at the beginning of the novel, Rachel grows sleepy midday and falls into a "dreamy confusion" (*VO*, 37). In this ecstatic, harmonious state where "her mind seemed to enter into communion, to be delightfully expanded and combined," Rachel feels metaphysically connected to a swell of things: "the spirit of the sea," "the spirit of Beethoven Op.111," "the spirit of poor William Cowper there at Olney." Then, at the peak of her sleep trance, Woolf merges Rachel's body with that of a ball of thistledown in the ocean. Here, the materiality of reality versus that of the dream becomes blurred, and the latter supplants the former. "Like a ball of thistledown it kissed the sea," Woolf writes, "rose, kissed it again, and thus rising and kissing passed finally out of sight." By refusing to provide an immediate referent for "it," Woolf refrains from associating the thistledown with something in Rachel's tangible world and instead draws the reader deeper into the nautical fantasy world, until this world becomes more real than the *Euphrosyne* and its drawing-room setting. Only after our sense of reality shifts does Woolf provide the referent: the thistledown is Rachel's lolling head as it drifts in and out of consciousness. But the ball of thistledown does not represent Rachel's head. Instead, the thistledown is itself "represented by the sudden droop forward of [Rachel's] own head" (37). Rachel's body is the immaterial metaphor, while the sea and its flora exist as tangible objects in the real world.

Woolf presents the dissolution of Rachel's body as a recurrent desire, expressed through Rachel's ties to the amorphous aqueous. I will return to this point throughout part one, but Rachel increasingly views her physical body as inextricably tied to the ideas used to justify women's oppression in society. As Rachel experiences her sexual awakening, she begins to trace the inescapable connections between the female body, sexuality, and biology—and she perceives how

patriarchy weaponizes her own body against her right to autonomy and liberation.[23] Before this realization, however, Rachel hardly views herself in terms of her body, and this enables her to contemplate existential matters and envision herself in the future as a fully formed thing. In one transient moment, Rachel has a "vision of her own personality, of herself as a real everlasting thing," and imagines herself as "different from anything else, unmergeable, like the sea or wind" (84). These meditative aspirations lucidly articulate her position on the verge and come closest to the kind of bildungsroman we would expect; they imply incompleteness, but also indicate a striking self-awareness in Rachel's ability to perceive not only what is absent from her personhood, but the full scope of her potential for fulfillment. Importantly, she expresses these desires through specific elements of nature. The adjectives she idealizes—"everlasting" and "unmergeable"—connect directly to the sublime as found in nature, and specifically to expansive features of nature, like the ocean. Thus, Rachel finds inspiration and spiritual energization through parts of nature that emphasize the nebulous, because these landscapes help her avoid the social designations assigned to her through her body.

Though Woolf replicates the social reality of Englishwomen in *The Voyage Out*, she does not perpetuate the societal cleavage of nature and culture, as Froula has interpreted. According to Froula, Woolf's first novel "shows how the paradigms of female initiation encourage the young woman to identify with nature rather than culture," but her claim eschews the complexity of Woolf's use of landscape, which is not cleanly bifurcated based on what contemporary social

[23] In *Three Guineas*, Woolf focuses on the ways in which women's labor and bodies have been economically exploited without monetary compensation. "Wives and mothers and daughters who work all day and every day," Woolf writes, "without whose work the State would collapse and fall to pieces, without whose work your sons, sir, would cease to exist, are paid nothing whatever" (66–7). If child-rearing is paramount to the preservation of the nation, why, asks Woolf, are women not compensated for carrying out their patriotic duties? "Is the work of a mother, of a wife, of a daughter, worth nothing to the nation in solid cash?" (66). Woolf even suggests that refusing to bear more children can serve as a strategic protest against war, following in the footsteps of Lysistrata. Silvia Federici explains it most succinctly: "The body has been for women in capitalist society what the factory has been for male waged workers: the primary ground of their exploitation and resistance" (16).

initiation rites encouraged (63). Froula concludes that "female initiation institutes women's absence from the culture of the public sphere, which becomes 'male' insofar as the male and female rites of passage succeed in preserving a dichotomy between 'male' culture and 'female' nature. Insofar as women's priorities must be home, husband, and children, public culture becomes a male domain" (65). I agree that Victorian men and women were socialized into the public and private spheres by virtue of this contrived culture/nature dichotomy, and Woolf's fictional recreation of that social world in the novel mirrors Woolf's contemporary reality, encouraging Rachel's indoctrination into art, knowledge, and history created by men. Froula also unearths an important conflict between Rachel and nature—specifically relating to the ways in which nature reminds her of biology—and I continue to explore this idea in my thesis, particularly in my later analysis of the jungle scene. But while Woolf's exclusion of women from the dominating cultural and intellectual worlds of the novel does reveal the prejudices of the society she critiques, it does not push Rachel to identify with nature as a last option. Rather, as I have argued, nature in the form of waterscapes provides a detached, liminal place where Rachel escapes both to grieve the absence of a female culture and to begin conceiving one.

In Woolf's protagonist, we therefore see the damaging effects that discomfort and displacement have on an individual in society, but we also see the outsider's positive potential—her capacity for understanding and progressive revision. Although both men and women in *The Voyage Out* hold on to regressive thoughts and social systems of organization, only Woolf's female characters ever come close to rupturing the confines of their Victorian worlds and emerging on the other side into a new modernist world. Indeed, Woolf sustains this exclusively female potential through her oeuvre—from Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* to Orlando in *Orlando: A Biography* to Rhoda in *The Waves* to Lily La Trobe in *Between the Acts*. Male characters, like Mr. Ambrose

or Terence Hewet, are too entrenched in the rules and institutions of their own making, too excited by the power society ascribed to their phalluses.[24] But women, as the pillars of the private world that uphold the public sphere, may observe the declining patriarchal world and one day, revise society. Woolf's suggestion in *Three Guineas*—that the daughters of educated men band together to form an "Outsiders' Society"—further evinces her belief in the progressive potential of individuals who were denied access to the more powerful reaches of society.

[24] Though Woolf initially positions Terence as a male equivalent to Rachel's abstract modernist sensibilities, engagement to Rachel quickly finds Terence reverting to his prescribed role, dominating and silencing Rachel.

III. Three Guiding Lights: Persuasion, Complicity, and Force

The bildungsroman narrative in *The Voyage Out* builds momentum and pressure as exterior social forces and other characters compete with Rachel's interior instincts. Unlike a male coming-of-age story, where the resources and knowledge compiled by others aid the protagonist in his voyage of self-discovery, Woolf's female bildungsroman inherently bears a conflict between the protagonist's development and the outside world. Although Rachel tries to absorb this male wisdom, "grop[ing] for knowledge in old books," she only "[finds] it in repulsive chunks" (*VO*, 35), which indicates an instinctive distaste towards the information available in books. "She did not naturally care for books," Woolf confirms, "and thus never troubled her head about the censorship which was exercised first by her aunts, later by her father." In this case, the male-exclusive institutions and education rituals that contribute to women's oppression do not inhibit Rachel; she still has her fantastic visions and separate interests.

Nevertheless, Woolf imposes a relentless pressure upon Rachel, forcing confrontations with character after character who attempt to educate her into the male-dominated culture. The pressure that Rachel faces from external social forces as she attempts to embark on an inward voyage of the soul embodies the tensions I propose between gendered and existential yearning. In this section, I discuss the sociocultural education that various characters impose upon Rachel, and how their demands force Rachel's attention away from her existential yearning and confine her to a gendered yearning that grapples specifically with problems of womanhood. I focus particularly on Clarissa Dalloway, Helen Ambrose, and Richard Dalloway, whom Froula has identified as representing three different modes of social education, through persuasion, complicity, and force, respectively (74). Through these characters' attempts to influence Rachel, Woolf tacitly unveils

Rachel's queer sexuality and unpacks the components of femininity and heterosexual relations that disturb Rachel.

Rachel's education begins with her father, Willoughby, who says he "want[s] to bring her up as her mother would have wished" (*VO*, 85). "'I don't hold with these modern views,'" Willoughby tells Helen, then reveals his hopes that she would take it upon herself to instruct Rachel on the art of proper femininity: "'She's a nice quiet girl, devoted to her music—a little less of that would do no harm'" (85). Willoughby invokes Rachel's mother, Theresa, frequently. Particularly in the *Melymbrosia* draft, Theresa's presence haunts the novel—and Rachel. "Theresa, the dead woman, again made herself felt" in all of Rachel's interactions with others (*M*, 24). In the absence of a mother figure, Rachel lacks that female thread that links familial history; she is displaced her in the world, but also allowed the perspective of an outsider and the freedom to probe beyond inherited feminine traditions that mothers pass on to their daughters. Woolf tells us, for instance, that "Rachel was indignant with the prosperous matrons, who made her feel outside their world and motherless" (*VO*, 57). Rachel feels excluded from the world of matrons because she cannot accept the social structures they identify with and operate within. Matronhood is the woman's last step in a social-biological life cycle that begins with marriage and motherhood, then transitions once she has lost her child-bearing capacity. Rachel's aversion to matronhood is an expression of her anxiety about motherhood, and the constricting path that this role sets a woman down. As I explore later, Rachel's virginity is crucial to the social criticism of *The Voyage Out*.

But Rachel also feels the simple loss of a maternal figure in her life, and resents the matrons for their artificial, surrogate maternalism that will never match the bond Rachel had with her birth mother. The persistence of this lost maternal figure finds echoes in several characters who try to educate Rachel, indicating a subconscious probe for an educating tradition that's distinctly female.

In this quest for the maternal, Woolf places Clarissa Dalloway and Helen Ambrose on opposite ends of a spectrum of feminine submission to gender roles in patriarchal England. Between Helen Ambrose, whose face is "much bolder" than that "of the usual pretty Englishwoman" (*VO*, 14), and Clarissa Dalloway, who appears "like an eighteenth-century masterpiece—a Reynolds or a Romney" (47), Rachel may choose between a female role model whose bohemian lifestyle hints at some modernist alternative vision—but never quite completes it—or one whose femininity drags back to a dead century of English history. Though Helen offers a much more progressive ideal than Clarissa, something still disturbs and unsettles Rachel about both options: neither woman abolishes or fully contends with the problem that prohibits Rachel's development, and both women reinforce material expectations of female beauty while they orient their lives around their husbands. Nevertheless, as we'll see, Helen comes closest to offering Rachel some sort of guiding maternal tradition or alternative understanding of her place in society.

Clarissa's glamorous displays entice Rachel towards conventional femininity; "mermaids, caves, the unseen things, suddenly desert [her]" when she thinks of Clarissa (*M*, 47). Rachel feels like an "incompetent, insignificant, unattractive girl" as she stares into a looking glass after the Dalloways arrive and realizes, with a "tense melancholy" (*M*, 47), that "her face was not the face she wanted, and in all probability never would be" (*VO*, 41). "What was it that Mrs. Dalloway revealed?" Rachel wonders in humiliation (*M*, 53). To be sure, the arrival of the Dalloways profoundly disrupts Rachel's placid indifference to the sitting room around her. They hold such a disarming power over Rachel, partly because their conformed identities, crafted around the caricatures of gender, are bound up in sex to such a degree that Rachel cannot escape thinking about it—even if she does not yet understand the whole of what she observes in their dynamic. "Rachel was conscious of her virginity," one character observes of Rachel after the Dalloways

arrive (*M*, 48). Clarissa's beauty and sensuality in particular rouses Rachel in a strange, hypnotizing way. Clarissa emanates "a curious scent of violets" that "mingl[es] with the soft rustling of her skirts, and the tinkling of her chains" (*VO* 47), and Rachel's fascination with these details almost betrays attraction of a sexual nature.[25]

However, Clarissa's presence also conjures Theresa's spirit. Her violet perfume—alluding to love and death—recalls a memory that Rachel dredges up one chapter earlier, when she is provoked by an olfactory description she reads in *Cowper's Letters*. Rachel remembers "the little hall at Richmond laden with flowers on the day of her mother's funeral, smelling so strong that now any flower-scent brought back the sickly horrible sensation" (35). These performative details of femininity that Clarissa embodies at once awaken in Rachel thoughts of sexuality, motherhood, and death—all inextricably wound together, and at this point in the narrative still unintelligible to our protagonist. We can see Woolf delve into these complex ideas and their relations through one intimate conversation Clarissa holds with Rachel. In this conversation, the subject of Rachel's mother rises to the surface:

> "Are you like your mother?"
> "No; she was different," said Rachel.
> She was overcome by an intense desire to tell Mrs. Dalloway things she had never told any one—things she had not realised herself until this moment.
> "I am lonely," she began. "I want—" She did not know what she wanted, so that she could not finish the sentence; but her lip quivered. (60)

Clarissa assumes she understands, and endeavors to comfort Rachel. "Putting one arm round Rachel's shoulder," Mrs. Dalloway confidingly tells her, "'When I was your age I wanted too. No one understood until I met Richard'" (61). What Rachel desires but cannot communicate through verbal language is to connect to that lost maternal, to find a female tradition from which she can

[25] Woolf's intentions to deny heterosexuality and instead write Rachel as either lesbian or bisexual were buried in the final version of *The Voyage Out*, but Rachel's queer sexuality is very explicit in *Melymbrosia*, particularly in one scene with Helen, which I discuss later in this section.

model her own coming-of-age.[26] But Clarissa willfully misinterprets and instead attributes fulfillment to finding one's place in a heterosexual relationship—ignoring Rachel's prior determination that she "shall never marry" (60). The comfort Rachel derives from her interaction with Clarissa develops partly in response to "Mrs. Dalloway's hand upon her arm" and partly from the maternal tone that Clarissa's experienced advice carries (61). With Mrs. Dalloway, Rachel receives firsthand exposure to typical heterosexual relations and the role of the feminine within that dynamic, but Woolf also gives Rachel the first potential maternal influence that she may learn and grow from. Still, while Clarissa Dalloway's presence comforts Rachel in some ways, it also makes her uneasy, and foreshadows the epiphany—one that connects sexuality and the power dynamics of "normal" heterosexual relationships—Rachel has after her traumatic interaction with Richard Dalloway.

By contrast, through Helen Ambrose's bohemian nature, Woolf crafts a knowledgeable, dependable maternal figure that also sparks Rachel's subtle and illicit exploration of her queer sexuality. "Draped in purple shawls" (14), Helen is an adult version of Rachel, with some exceptions: she has accepted the patriarchal conventions under which society operates, and though she maintains some semblance of self, much of her identity is sunken by the demands that her social role places upon her. Despite her relative status as a maverick, Helen's character is critically shaped by her patriarchal socialization. In Helen, we discover an irresolvable conflict of personality that reveals the complex nature of maternal influences, and consequently, the concept of the female tradition as a viable alternative to the dominant, male-exclusive culture of fathers and sons.

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[26] Rachel's absence of a mother figure directly contrasts her probable modernist inheritor at the end of the novel, Evelyn Murgatroyd, who importantly describes herself as "the daughter of a mother and no father" (190). By giving Rachel's successor the mother she never had, Woolf underscores the importance of a female tradition, or the ability to look back "through our mothers."

As an alternative to Clarissa's rigid Victorian silhouette, Helen appears to be the better role model for Woolf's modernist-verging protagonist. Unlike Clarissa, Helen "desired that Rachel should think" (124), and convinces Rachel's father to let her stay in the Ambroses' private villa. There, Helen offers Rachel a private room in her villa with the knowledge that rooms "became more like worlds than rooms at the age of twenty-four" (123). Aware that "some sort of change was taking place in the human being," in Rachel's spiritual and intellectual core, Helen attempts to meaningfully guide Rachel's development. Yet Helen's ideal education is still a remnant of the subjects and modes of knowledge that patriarchal hegemony values. According to Willoughby's instruction, Helen tries to discourage Rachel from "too entire a dependence upon Bach, Beethoven, and Wagner"—which we can read as an attempt to disconnect Rachel from alternative modes of communication that she naturally seeks out.[27] But Rachel's preferences for literature eschew the novels that Helen suggests—"Defoe, Maupassant, or some spacious chronicle of family life"—and instead gravitate towards modern books (124). Helen considers these books "tokens [. . .] of harsh wrangling and disputes about facts," and her ingrained patriarchal thought patterns reject such lofty explorations and devaluation of facts. Woolf increasingly comes to associate the solidity of facts with a distinctly patriarchal way of apprehending the world, and in *The Voyage Out*, Rachel's character represents an attempt to break out of that masculine perspective.

Just as Helen prioritizes male knowledge, so, too, does she prefer the company of men; she generally disdains women and claims that "there was nothing to take hold of in girls—nothing hard, permanent, satisfactory" (20). She participates in behaviors that prioritize heterosexual power dynamics and promote petty disagreements between women. When Rachel relates her

[27] Rachel's reliance upon music as an alternative form of communication is emphasized through Woolf's conflation of the landscape with music. When later in the novel Rachel wanders off by herself to read, she experiences a moment of exultation. Woolf writes that "gigantic melodies seemed to float between the hills and come across the valleys" (*M*, 194).

distressing experience with Mr. Dalloway, Helen tells her, "You must take things as they are" (81). The tone implies triviality and reveals Helen's acceptance that such interactions are commonplace. Men devour, and women allow themselves to be devoured. Helen then confides to Rachel that she's "rather jealous [. . .] that Mr. Dalloway kissed you and didn't kiss me," exposing the deep patriarchal socializations that characterize her thought patterns. Though Richard "bored [Helen] considerably," Victorian society conditions her as a woman to seek approval from men. Helen's envious response exemplifies the female's lingering tendency to pursue recognition from indiscriminate males as affirmation of sexual value, which becomes synonymous with inherent feminine value.

But Helen possesses a strange clairvoyance that complicates her portrayal—and therefore, her relationship to Rachel—by supposing Helen as a failed modernist. In *Melymbrosia*, Helen appears much more self-aware and jaded; though she still succumbs to patriarchal hegemony, we are inclined to read her behavior as resignation more than willful ignorance. After Willoughby agrees to discharge Rachel to Helen and Ridley for the duration of the trip, Helen considers presciently that if she "could have read [Rachel's] mind she would have felt more sure than ever that destiny marked her for a dupe" (*M*, 103). Foreboding Rachel's tragic end, Helen seems to intuit the substantial contents of Rachel's mind and the unlikelihood that her being will survive intact. Such insight on Helen's part would necessitate a kindred spiritual connection between her and Rachel, a similarity of soul. The notion of Helen as a failed modernist[28]—a woman who eventually gave in to the strictures that compressed her all her life—holds its own ground when we consider Helen's wavering patriotism. She, too, sees London as a burnt mound in the scene

[28] Helen has some connections to the natural landscape, just as Rachel does. During the jungle expedition, for example, Helen expresses and channels her existential anxiety through her surroundings. Woolf writes that Helen "became acutely conscious of the little limbs, the thin veins, the delicate flesh of men and women, which breaks so easily and lets the life escape compared with these great trees and deep waters" (*VO*, 286).

where the *Euphrosyne* moves further away from the English mainland.

After encountering a native village during a group jungle expedition, Helen is profoundly unsettled, and cannot help "seeing a picture of a boat upset on the river in England, at midday" (*VO,* 286). This vision carries an undercurrent of anti-nationalist sentiment, but also arises as a continuation of Helen's anxiety about Rachel's impending engagement and the significance of the jungle expedition in Rachel's development. Helen cannot stop looking at Rachel and Terence, hoping in repeated, irrational bouts that "she could protect them from their fate" or "from disaster." Helen's conflation of the couple's fate with disaster emphasizes her clairvoyant presence in the novel. "At her age, she understood [. . .] the immense seriousness of what had happened," Woolf writes of Helen at the close of the jungle expedition chapter (*M*, 292). Once engaged, "Rachel had passed beyond [Helen's] guardianship," underscoring the cyclical nature of the maternal tradition (285). Under patriarchy, the role of the mother—or in this case, mother figure—is to prepare the daughter for her own passage into motherhood. A cycle of indoctrination, the female tradition finds it difficult to build meaningful interactions with predecessors because it is a tradition built for the sustenance of patriarchal social structures and hierarchies. Helen feels "strangely old and depressed" in response to Rachel's engagement because it reminds her of these inescapable structures that women find themselves participating in even subconsciously, by attempting to educate their daughters. Helen's protectiveness over Rachel and deep dismay at her engagement demonstrates the difficulty of constructive dynamics between women who reside under patriarchal institutions.

The homoerotic possibilities that Woolf plants in Rachel and Helen's relationship also multiplies the dimensions of Rachel's desire for a female tradition. In *Melymbrosia*, Woolf imbues Rachel and Helen's interactions with overt homoerotic elements, which were later cut out or

mitigated in *The Voyage Out*. In one scene, Rachel and Helen spring ahead of everyone else on a group walk and playfully chase each other until they're on the ground, wrestling:

> Helen pursued her. She plucked tufts of leathery blades and cast them at her. They outdistanced the others. Suddenly Rachel stopped and opened her arms so that Helen rushed into them and tumbled her over onto the ground. "Oh Helen Helen!" she could hear Rachel gasping as she rolled her, "Don't! For God's sake! Stop! I'll tell you a secret! I'm going to be married!" (301)

The scene culminates with high sexual tensions as Helen pins Rachel "absolutely flat upon the ground, her arms out on either side of her, her hat off, her hair down." What follows is an intimate emotional exchange between the two, where Helen feels "inevitable jealousy" as Rachel talks of Terence (302).

Patricia Juliana Smith has written about what she terms "lesbian panic"[29] in *The Voyage Out*, particularly as expressed through Helen and her feelings for Rachel. Smith describes Helen's attempts to blend into heteronormative patriarchal relations as "part of her greater structure of elaborate self-masking." "Yet Helen's own sexual dysphoria," Smith observes, "manifested in emotional vacillation, destabilizes her quasi-maternal authority over Rachel and climaxes in an otherwise inexplicable display of panic" (130). I will not comment on Helen's sexuality, but do want to point out the sexual tension that manifests between Helen and Rachel even as Rachel looks for a comforting sisterly or maternal presence in Helen. Woolf's dual employment of Helen as a surrogate mother and a channel of homoerotic tension suggests that Woolf perceived a link in different forms of female relationships, and wanted to explore these in the context of forming a female tradition. The reading I offer echoes the contentions of critic Patricia Cramer, who argues that Woolf's lesbian identity belongs within a "particular lesbian tradition" of writers who "adopt

[29] Smith describes "lesbian panic" as "the disruptive action or reaction that occurs when a character—or conceivably, an author—is either unable or unwilling to confront or reveal her own lesbianism or lesbian desire" (129).

the homoerotic self as a center from which to oppose patriarchal values and to reimagine self and community" (qtd. in Barrett, 177). Rachel's relationship with Helen at once submits to the difficulties of extricating female relationships from patriarchal hegemony and implies a potential alternative organization of society, which Woolf expounds upon in *Three Guineas*, when she devises the Outsiders' Society.

Now that I have examined two versions of surrogate mothers presented to Rachel, I consider Rachel's experience with Richard Dalloway, the ultimate patriarch. Rachel's collision with Richard cements the existential probing incited by Clarissa, and reveals to her the societal limitations placed upon women. As the ultimate Victorian patriarch, Richard Dalloway's explicitly masculine qualities command Rachel's attention. "She was curiously conscious of his presence and appearance," Woolf writes of Rachel's inevitable gravitation towards Richard (*VO*, 55). Inexplicably enamored with the patriarchal silhouette, Rachel desperately desires to delve into the depths of Richard's character. "Please—tell me everything," she wants to say to him, but bashfully remains silent. Richard's dismissal of Rachel and his anachronistic views on women later inflame her mind with a masculine-coded "thrusting desire to be understood" (67). Rachel wants to meet Richard on his own playing field, and is certainly capable, but his domineering presence reduces and silences her perspective.

Mr. Dalloway does not only diminish Rachel by wielding her womanhood against her; he also devours her with his authoritarian presence, monopolizing conversation and reducing her to a few words in between. With an action emblematic of the patriarchal ideal of masculinity, Richard "hold[s] her tight," violently subjecting her to his will (76). She must confront "the hardness of his body," "the roughness of his cheek," and for the first time experience the brutal force of masculinity in what could arguably be categorized as a sexual assault. "You tempt me," Richard

then tells her simply, implying she is to blame for his actions. Because Rachel's sexual awakening has not yet peaked, she struggles to understand the insinuation and to find a source that may have provoked Richard. The storm that concurrently occurs in this section accentuates the emotional turbulence of Rachel's experience and emphasizes her connections to the landscape. After the encounter with Richard ends, Rachel turns to the "detached and unconcerned" sea birds that rode along the "hollows of the waves," absorbing her environment—the "troubled grey waters" and "sunlight fitfully scattered"—"until she was cold and absolutely calm again."

The bestial sexuality that Rachel is subjected to remains in her thoughts long after the interaction is over—it penetrates to the core of her psychic space. Immediately after Rachel's abrasive private encounter with Richard, she falls into a troubled sleep:

> She must have been very tired for she fell asleep at once, but after an hour or two of dreamless sleep, she dreamt. She dreamt that she was walking down a long tunnel, which grew so narrow by degrees that she could touch the damp bricks on either side. At length the tunnel opened and became a vault; she found herself trapped in it, bricks meeting her wherever she turned, alone with a little deformed man who squatted on the floor gibbering, with long nails. His face was pitted and like the face of an animal. The wall behind him oozed with damp, which collected into drops and slid down. Still and cold as death she lay, not daring to move, until she broke the agony by tossing herself across the bed, and woke crying "Oh!"
>
> Light showed her the familiar things: her clothes, fallen off the chair; the water jug gleaming white; but the horror did not go at once. She felt herself pursued, so that she got up and actually locked her door. A voice moaned for her; eyes desired her. All night long barbarian men harassed the ship; they came scuffling down the passages, and stopped to snuffle at her door. She could not sleep again. (77)

As I previously touched upon, alternative states of consciousness hold a particular significance for Rachel, who finds energy and inspiration in the boundlessness of these states. But in this instance, the social horrors of reality intrude upon her expansive dream worlds. Rachel's obscure, psychosexual nightmare pulls to the surface the underlying sexual tensions that were present in her interaction with Richard. The cave's claustrophobic space, coupled with highly visceral

representations, combines to create a nauseating effect that reveals Rachel's anxiety surrounding sexuality. Moreover, the image appears to imitate the womb, signaling that the nightmare is a birth of sorts—an awakening to a horror that Rachel is much more bound to than she would like to believe. Despite the dream's abstract and abstruse imagery, Woolf still manages to impart the sense that sexuality is a negative force, especially in Rachel's life. The nightmare's significance spills over into Rachel's waking life, distorting reality so that other men in the hallway outside her room become "barbarian men" that "harassed the ship." Rachel begins to conceive of men and masculinity as possessing a predatory nature that is inherently dangerous to her own existence.

Following this troubling nightmare, Rachel's mind works "quickly, inconsistently, and painfully" to unearth the biological entanglements that taint relations between men and women, until she exclaims in revelation, "So that's why I can't walk alone!" (81–2). Her life becomes "a creeping, hedged-in thing" as her reflexive aversion to Richard becomes less opaque (82). Reality, for the Edwardian Englishwoman, decidedly lacks the fluidity and expansiveness that Rachel's mind naturally possesses. A momentary terror seizes Rachel as she realizes that her life is "the short season between two silences," and her identity as a woman will complicate her freedom as a human being. Rachel pines for the luxury of existential yearning, but must first contend with the petty, inescapable elements of gendered yearning. As the corrupted bildungsroman progresses, her potentiality of being is blunted and her coming-of-age is increasingly marred by gendered yearning.

IV. Trees of Desire: A Semiotics of Sensuality

Rachel's most positively transformative developmental moments occur in the context of her solitude and proximity to nature. In these scenes, Rachel's fertile thoughts—encouraged by the books she reads, but also by the world around her—blossom into "moments of being" where she becomes so concentrated and contemplative that her thoughts attain revelatory proportions. Through these moments of being, we feel that Rachel's state approaches true epiphanic consummation—one which we expect of a genre that has historically relied upon what M. M. Bakhtin calls "an image of a *man growing* in *national-historical time*" (qtd. in Esty, 5; emphasis in original). Commonly termed the "novel of progress" and meant to narratively reflect ideas of national-historical growth concretely through a protagonist, the bildungsroman carries the expectation of fulfillment by the end of the novel, and Woolf's moments of being hint at an impending developmental breakthrough. These scenes place us—and Rachel—on a precipice: below, we see an unknown abyss that could lead to a breakthrough, a better world, one beyond the society we are familiar with. These solitary moments in Rachel's education contrast with her conversations with other characters, and a shadow of uncertainty falls across the path that others in the novel want her to take.

Before we explore Rachel's expansive moments of being, we must first understand her mind relative to the education she has been given. Since Rachel was "educated as the majority of well-to-do girls in the last part of the nineteenth century," her instruction—composed of rudimentary fragments that bourgeois Englishwomen were allowed for the purposes of entertaining their husbands' guests—places her on the disadvantaged peripheries of the education necessary to properly advance in the world (*VO*, 33). According to Woolf, a bourgeois Englishwoman's intellectual cultivation was mostly artifice and "did not teach anything" but "it

put no obstacle in the way of any real talent that the pupil might chance to have" (34). Because Rachel's noncommittal education ironically "[leaves] her abundant time for thinking" (35), she may tend to her persistent musings and seek connections in the world: "She felt that if only one could begin things at the beginning, one might see more clearly upon what foundations they now rest" (*M*, 39). Woolf exploits the position of the daughter of an educated man, hovering in the doorway of rooms where intellectual conversation takes place. She discovers a conducive space within her excluded position, but uses that space for her own explorations instead of those prescribed to her. Indeed, Rachel is in the nascent stages of that very same "mental fight" that Woolf suggests women participate in (*Death of the Moth*, 155).

Consequently, the formal world of academia seems to bore Rachel; she owns all of Mr. Pepper's "little pamphlets," for example, but "it did not appear that she had read them," which indicates a superficial—if not simply polite—interest in the literature and discussions of male intellectuals (*VO*, 19). Mark Wollaeger has also noted Rachel's "difficulty of locating herself in relation to the history [others] urge her to read" (44). This disinterest is symbolic, as Woolf roots Rachel's rejection of books in a refusal to participate in a broader patriarchal culture that includes academia, but pushes beyond that and taints the society at large. Woolf describes Mr. Pepper's scholarship as "little yellow books" (19), a color that reminds us of the "pale yellow canopy" of lights or the "fine yellow fog" that covers London (17, 13). Woolf's repetition of the color yellow connects the knowledge available in books and history to civilization and advancement, but given Woolf's alternative conception of civilization as a thing scarred by the same objects that propel it onward, she implies that our traditional ways of knowing, our canonical guiding texts, may not be enough to lead us moving forward. In *Melymbrosia*, Rachel explicitly "wonder[s] why people read," and considers that "so learned a man [as Ridley Ambrose] must be deaf," suggesting that those entrenched in hegemonic knowledge necessarily miss apprehending the world in other ways

(*M,* 191).[30] However, Woolf still forces Rachel to encounter books meaningfully—including foundational Western texts like Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* which other characters like Hirst insist she read, but also the modernist plays of Scandinavian Henrik Ibsen that she picks up of her own accord.

More than any other book Rachel encounters in the course of her bildungsroman, the *Works of Henrik Ibsen* inspires and incites Rachel's imagination. At her aunt's villa, Rachel importantly receives "an enchanted place"—"a room cut off from the rest of the house," which serves as "a fortress as well as a sanctuary" where she finds the privacy and space she needs to explore Ibsen (123). Removing her from the social pressures and gendered duties of the sitting room, this precious acquisition of private property nourishes Rachel's intrinsic expansive qualities: she can at long last "play, read, think, defy the world." When alone, Rachel immediately gravitates towards "modern books," which are far opposed to the canonical texts that others have been bombarding her with since the beginning of the voyage (124). As she settles into reading Ibsen, an instantaneous transformation takes place within her: "Far from looking bored or absent-minded," as she did in the beginning of the novel, "her eyes were concentrated almost sternly upon the page, and from her breathing, which was slow but repressed, it could be seen that her whole body was constrained by the working of her mind" (123). Enthralled by the heroine of Ibsen's play, Rachel abandons her corporeal being and steps into this imaginative world, where her spirit inflates and expands in wisps of philosophical considerations and vivid imaginings. "What is the truth?" she asks sincerely, aloud to herself, and also to the heroine of the play. But Rachel's response to books and language functions on a different level, in a different tongue. Rachel processes the words

[30] Rachel's comment also highlights the auditory realm as an alternative form of communication outside of what books may offer. We can link her observation that a pronounced intellectual like Ridley Ambrose "must be deaf" to her interest in music as an alternative form of expression.

differently, translating the written text into a tactile experience where she "handl[es] words as though they were made of wood, separately of great importance, and possessed of shapes like tables or chairs" (124). Rachel's mind seems to grasp for a method of communication that does not mediate between the experience of reality and the transcription of it, but rather conveys the experience as vividly as it is lived, thereby connecting across the barriers of language.

In this passage, Woolf forms a connection between Rachel's spiritual-intellectual enlargement and the sensory world. She communicates Rachel's transformative experience through a semiotics of sensuality that is reminiscent of Woolf's rapturous descriptions of the moments of being which pervaded her own youth. Detailing her first memory as a child, Woolf writes of "feeling the purest ecstasy [she] can conceive" as her senses were flooded with "the waves breaking, one, two, one, two," outside her window (*Moments*, 65; 64). A lavish and rhythmic sensuality washes over many of the positive[31] moments of being Woolf describes, and we see this semiotics of sensuality employed throughout *The Voyage Out* to characterize Rachel's confrontations with a burgeoning existential awareness—of her being and her potential as a modernist outsider to Edwardian society.

This semiotics of sensuality effectively pulls at the seams of the novel's sitting-room-setting reality. When Rachel turns her gaze from the pages of the book to the landscape outside her window, reality and fiction—the concrete and the abstract—blur in Rachel's mind, creating a liminal realm that exists separately from the physical reality Rachel inhabits. This alternative world does not quite duplicate the imaginative sphere that Ibsen's protagonist lives in, but rather is an extension of its possibilities, as Rachel envisions them applied to her own life and story. In a parenthetical to this passage, Woolf reveals why Ibsen's works have such a profound effect on

[31] She discusses what I term "negative" moments of being, too, and I delve into these in the next section, exploring the forms they take in Rachel's coming-of-age story.

Rachel: "Her mind wandered away from Nora, but she went on thinking of things that the book suggested to her, of women and life" (124).[32] Contrasted with the words on the page, the landscape still appears menacingly "solid and clear," but for the first time, Rachel allows that social reality to fall to the background as she instead "dominat[es] the view," imagining herself as "the most vivid thing in [the landscape]" (123). Her imagination seizes this empowering moment, and once again Rachel vacates her body—which sits "rigidly" in its chair—and reappears as "an heroic statue in the middle of the foreground." Rachel's assertion of her figure as dominating the center of the landscape translates to a victory against the normally gender-constricting, sex-based environment.

Mark Wollaeger has commented on the "erotic charge" of the trees found in *The Voyage Out*, focusing particularly on the olive trees described in this scene, wherein "men on the hill [are] washing the trunks [. . .] with a white liquid" (123).[33] Indeed, Woolf imbues the wild landscapes in her novel—and the jungle in particular, as we'll see—with explosive, almost lethal sexual energy. Woolf's conflation of solid landscapes with erotic tension implies inextricable ties between sex relations and the constraints women face in society. The civic hierarchy—justified by biology and the power dynamics implicit in heterosexual relationships—is rooted in the social landscape just as the trees are rooted in the earth. This exploitative and oppressive hierarchy, Woolf insists, thrives in the solid patriarchal landscape. Rachel's liberated flashes of imagination, which push towards sublime moments of being, must necessarily reject the solid landscape in their struggle to flower.

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[32] Woolf references Ibsen's protagonist from *A Doll's House*, a play in which Nora, a married woman, eventually leaves her domestic life behind, prioritizing for the first time her own needs and desires over those of her husband and children. Rachel's sense of empowerment therefore derives from this alternative representation of the possibilities open to women.

[33] Wollaeger also notes that this detail was not added to the novel until Woolf returned from her honeymoon and read Leonard's *Village in the Jungle*.

Here I would like to pause and emphasize that Rachel's fears of sexuality are directed explicitly towards heterosexual dynamics and the displays of aggressiveness and violence built into those acts. Her sexuality as expressed through a queer identity offers much more constructive possibilities. The reading I offer once again follows Cramer's supposition that the homoerotic in Woolf's work serves partly as a rhetorical tool to oppose hegemonic ideologies. Though Rachel is arguably bisexual,[34] her buried feelings for women specifically seem to signify a budding political as well as personal alternative to the problem of heterosexuality and all it entails. After Rachel reads Ibsen, her visions grow more ideologically lucid, and she increasingly turns to this alternative reality when she is distressed by the patriarchal reality that presses up against her. When St. John Hirst directs casual misogyny at Rachel while they converse at the dance, Rachel escapes to the garden and invents a different life for herself, one where "she would be a Persian princess far from civilization, riding her horse upon the mountains alone, and making her women sing to her in the evening, far from all this, from the strife and men and women" (155). Stressed by the seemingly irresolvable conflicts and misunderstandings between the sexes, Rachel imaginatively devises an illusory peaceful matriarchal society in response. The landscape therefore provides a space unmarred by the social paradigms of English hegemony, which Rachel escapes to and so she may probe her alternative visions of the world. However, as I stated in section II, the natural landscape also evolves into an abstract symbology that enables Rachel's exploration of the unspeakable thoughts which characterize her experiences of specific gendered yearning and general existential yearning.

Through the trees that Woolf emphasizes in the scene where Rachel reads Gibbon, I examine the landscape's symbological function with respect to both types of yearning. As Rachel

[34] Though her feelings for Terence are conflicted, she does nevertheless seem to exhibit feelings for him; whether these feelings are of a purely romantic or also sexual nature is perhaps a topic for another thesis.

takes *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* on a stroll with her, Woolf estranges Rachel in the countryside; she describes how Rachel "lose[s] sight of civilization" and enters a liberating world of solitude (173). Rachel chooses to stay close to the aqueous, following a "grass path running by a river bed." However, anticipating the confrontations Rachel will have with the notion of civilization, she finds the source of water all but dried out, "a deep channel of dry yellow stones." The color of the pebbles again reminds us of the associations Woolf creates between yellow and the societal advancements and institutions of patriarchy, foreshadowing Rachel's grapplings with these foundations of English society—but beyond that, Western civilization as a whole. Indeed, Woolf chooses Gibbon's historical text on the Roman Empire for this exact reason—so we may trace the roots of Western patriarchal thought. Rachel's mind wanders and stumbles into various digressions; her body carries her mechanically along the path, and Woolf writes that "she might have walked until she had lost all knowledge of her way" were it not for the "interruption of a tree"—which "stopped her as effectively as if the branches had struck her in the face," even though Woolf notes that the tree was not in Rachel's way (174). Mark Wollaeger has also analyzed this scene's symbolic trees, and he discusses the ways in which Rachel's "only tree in the world" both facilitates and blocks Rachel's acquisition of knowledge (*VO,* 174). He observes that the lone tree in this scene brings Rachel backs to knowledge and to Gibbon—though here Wollaeger does not mention Woolf's evocations of the biblical story of the Tree of Knowledge.[35] In focusing on Woolf's description of Rachel nearly losing "all knowledge of her way" before she

[35] If this lone tree is linked to Gibbon and the possibility of attaining "all knowledge," as Wollaeger posits, then understanding this scene in light of this biblical allegory only further illuminates Woolf's attempts to connect male knowledge with heterosexual paradigms. She indirectly links the ruined, sinful parts of civilization with male structures and institutions. This reading becomes even more complicated when we consider that this biblical story (and really, any biblical reference) is itself emblematic of a culture formed by patriarchal society. Woolf explicitly connects Christianity to patriarchal hegemony in *The Voyage Out* (through Mr. Bax and the churchgoing scene), and later in *Three Guineas*, she rails against the Christian church as one of the chief institutions that contributes to a patriarchal-fascist state.

sees the tree, Wollaeger misinterprets this possibility of wandering off the path as a negative danger.

But Woolf wants nothing more than to help Rachel lose her way and forget established systems of knowledge. Rachel is perpetually falling off the Victorian path as she delves into her imaginative visions and alternative worlds. Moreover, as I have argued, throughout the novel we are given hints that the traditional books and literature available to Rachel for consumption are not what she needs to access her full potential. Rather, what she needs is to distance herself from those forms of knowledge that oppress her and restrict her worldview. We can still connect this tree to knowledge, but must do so with the understanding that Woolf's idea of knowledge refers specifically to hegemonic knowledge and its sociopolitical consequences. However, Wollaeger also observes that the "irruption of the tree also acts as a block to knowledge" (50). To understand Woolf's multifaceted employment of trees as a symbology, we should consider them in both productive and destructive terms that aim to explore the dimensions of Rachel's different yearnings. Wollaeger bifurcates the trees according to notions of "riot and restraint" that he believes allude to Conrad's representations of vegetation in *Heart of Darkness* (49).[36] I further nuance Woolf's arboreal landscape and consider its symbology as expressive of biology and sex (gendered yearning), but also as an ontological assessment of the nature of time and human civilization (existential yearning).

While Woolf's trees carry phallic connotations that represent the oppressive patriarchal society, they also remind Rachel of a queer sexuality she struggles to find space for. Wollaeger determines the source of Rachel's sublime experience as the dark-trunked tree,[37] but Woolf

[36] According to Wollaeger, this allusion is mirrored in "Rachel's violent swings between rebellion and anxious acquiescence" (49).

[37] Through the Conradian dichotomy, Wollaeger claims that Rachel experiences "the collision of consciousness and the overwhelming thereness of reality that exceeds consciousness" that enable her sublime "moments of vision" (50).

mentions Rachel's "unreasonable exultations" before she stumbles upon the discomfiting tree (*VO*, 173). Rachel's ecstatic sentiments and energized wanderings of the mind ensue after she passes a grove of trees that "bore large blossoms [. . .] with petals of a thick wax-like substance coloured an exquisite cream or pink or deep crimson." "April had burst [the] buds" of these luxurious and sensual trees, which Woolf associates with Helen when Rachel thinks of them as "those trees which Helen had said it was worth the voyage out merely to see." In Patricia Cramer's introduction to *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings* (1997), she discusses a connection in Woolf's work between flowers and sexual feelings that women feel towards each other (122). Juxtaposed with the charged sexual feelings that Rachel seems to harbor for other women—and for Helen in particular—this scene and Rachel's subsequent feelings of exultation can be traced not to the "great black trees" of Conrad's imagination (*VO*, 154), but rather to Rachel's budding queer identity. After her confrontation with the large imposing tree, Rachel sits down and "pick[s] the red flowers with the thin green leaves which were growing beneath it. She laid them side by side, flower to flower and stalk to stalk, caressing them for walking alone" (174). In direct contrast to her reaction to the tree, the flowers soothe her and "[bring] back the feelings of a child." A semiotics emerges from this symbology of trees and flowers that gives expression to ideas that could not be openly explored—or seriously considered—in Woolf's time.

This sexual awakening in turn feeds into Rachel's changing perceptions of the world; after noticing the flowering trees, she begins walking faster, which transforms her sight of the forest around her into abstract "masses of green and blue" (173). The erotically charged trees offer a glimpse into Rachel's growing anxieties about heterosexuality and her tentative but repressed probing of her love for women. The relative obscurity of these homoerotic feelings, nestled as they are in the blooming buds of the trees, further emphasizes the necessarily limiting nature of gendered yearning. Social codes that operate strictly within traditional gender roles also religiously

uphold heterosexual dynamics, which is why Woolf's revisions from *Melymbrosia* to *The Voyage Out* conceal the offbeat relationship between Rachel and Helen.[38] Woolf also uses the trees to explore a continuous stream of ideas that Rachel contends with through the entire novel—of time, civilization, and the sweep of history. "She was haunted by absurd jumbled ideas," Woolf writes of Rachel, "how, if one went back far enough, everything perhaps was intelligible; everything was in common; for the mammoths who pastured in the fields of Richmond High Street had turned into paving stones and boxes full of ribbon, and her aunts" (67). Rachel seeks a unified understanding of humans and their history, but also obliquely articulates a connection between barbarity and civilization—a continuity of thought that links the first primitive humans to her modern-day society. Woolf wants us to perceive the long history of social order and structural organization as an elaboration upon the crude biological foundations that governed the earliest human societies.

Dramatizing Rachel's quest for a coherent timeline—one which finds a source to the ills of civilization—through the trees and their relation to knowledge, Woolf elaborates upon Conrad's depictions of wild vegetation that has the potential to transport humans "back to the earliest beginnings of the world" (Conrad 49). On the one hand, Rachel contends with the landscape as an everlasting, timeless thing that energizes and inspires her expansive thoughts. But on the other hand, the landscape chronicles the history of human civilization and reminds Rachel of the masculine impulse to conquer and dominate—especially given the contemporary context of the British colonialist enterprise. These inquiries are ontological in nature, and characterize Rachel's general existential yearning that pushes her towards that strange suspended moment with the seemingly "ordinary tree":

> Dark was the trunk in the middle, and the branches sprang here and there, leaving jagged intervals of light between them as distinctly as if it had but that second risen

[38] To remember the expressly homoerotic tones that permeate *Melymbrosia,* we need only look at the scene between Rachel and Helen that I discussed in section III.

> from the ground. Having seen a sight that would last her for a lifetime, and for a lifetime would preserve that second, the tree once more sank into the ordinary ranks of trees. (174)

Importantly, Rachel's experience of the tree—though less articulate—appears to affect her more profoundly than that of reading Gibbon. When Rachel opens the book, its words, "so vivid and so beautiful," dazzle her, but they lack staying power (175). Initially, "they seemed to drive roads back to the very beginning of the world, on either side of which the populations of all times and countries stood in avenues," but Rachel is more excited by the "possibilities of knowledge" than the actual knowledge contained in Gibbon—so she "ceased to read." She then returns to the thoughts that began after she noticed Helen's blossoming trees; "her mind became less confused and sought the origins of her exaltation": St. John Hirst and Terence Hewet. Through "the very words of books," Rachel is reminded of these men, from whom "all life seemed to radiate." Connecting male presence in her life with knowledge and education, Rachel "then became haunted by a suspicion which she was [. . .] reluctant to face"—though the reader knows the shape of the power structures Rachel is too afraid to recognize.

Rachel also grapples with the ways in which hegemony forms and shapes private relations between individuals in a society. When Rachel asks in that same scene, "What is it to be in love?" she tries to interrogate the concept separate from what men and women are in society, but finds an inescapable dynamic where the woman is dependent upon the man—financially, educationally, etc. Woolf explores whether romantic love can exist independently of gendered power dynamics, and through Rachel's conflicted thoughts and feelings, she attempts—and ultimately fails—to define love in a vacuum removed from social pressures.

V. Oppressive Jungle: The Sublime of Terror

From the claustrophobic jungle space and its primitively rendered native inhabitants Woolf invokes a Burkean sublime aesthetic, fashioning a subjective world of fever and tension to signify a culmination of and final confrontation with the ideas surrounding gender and biology. Like the trees offer Rachel a semiotics of sensuality through which she begins to understand her sexuality, and like the ocean provides a symbology whose fluidity suggests possibility and new perceptions, so too does the jungle space hold a language of symbols and their respective ideas. Through combined signifiers like excessive sensory detail and a denseness that forces intimacy, the jungle landscape transforms into a signified omen of Rachel's future as Terence Hewet's wife. This semiotics relies on Edmund Burke's postulation of the sublime as rooted in the "ideas of pain and danger," or "whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror" (499). In his *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Burke asserts that the feelings incited by pain are much more powerful than those deriving from pleasure. Woolf similarly describes certain moments of being in her life as "violent shock[s]" (*Moments*, 71), and in *The Voyage Out*, Rachel's critical developmental moments are characterized by these feelings of distress and indescribable discomfort. As the novel progresses, Woolf induces an increasing sense of psychic peril in Rachel, until this festering anxiety erupts in the South American jungle.

As critics like Mark Wollaeger and Constance S. Richards have noted, Woolf's tropical forest finds direct inspiration in the jungle that Joseph Conrad conceived in *Heart of Darkness* (1899)—a novella which Conrad scholars are at last beginning to excavate for its affinities with

the Romantic tradition of the sublime.[39] In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad describes the "colossal jungle" as if it were a monster still asleep, with depths unfathomable, "so dark green as to be almost black" (28). The aura surrounding the tropical forest contains a dreamy, dissociative quality; only "a boat on the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality." The "great wall of vegetation" threatens humans, "ready [. . .] to sweep every little man [. . .] out of his little existence" (45). Conrad's jungle smothers its characters; its density, vastness, and impenetrability overwhelm the finitude of humans and their settlements in a manner that, as we'll see with Woolf's jungle, recalls Burke's conception of the sublime. Critic Philip Dickinson proposes that "the Burkean emphasis upon loss of rational control [. . .] seems to suggest the sublime's postcolonial potential" (2).[40] Postcolonial critiques, Dickinson says, must undermine the pre-established modes of expression as employed by the colonizers. The sublime carries that capacity for challenging prescribed hegemonic codes because postcolonial writers may use it to "foreground [. . .] the failure of their art to represent the culture, history, and consciousness of others." I will return to the topic of Woolf and postcolonial criticisms at the end of this section, but want to raise this possibility of the sublime—and the pregnant silence it invokes—as an aesthetic gesture that Woolf uses with ideological intent.

In her initial description of the jungle, Woolf summons forth the opposing concepts of civilization and nature. In the *Melymbrosia* draft, Woolf portrays the jungle as a place that beckons readers back to the beginning of time. She invites the reader "to find the source of the river," then

[39] See Patrick and Kelli Fuery's "Agitational Ethics: Conrad, Malick, and the Sublime"; Francis Singh's "Terror, Terrorism, and Horror in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*"; or Philip Dickinson's "Postcolonial romanticisms? The sublime and negative capability in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*."

[40] Dickinson assumes that *Heart of Darkness* is a postcolonial critique of empire, but such a claim is not widely accepted by scholars. Chinua Achebe, for example, famously denounced Conrad as a "thoroughgoing racist" (qtd. in Dickinson). For the purposes of my inquiry, however, I will not delve into the veracity of Dickinson's identification, but rather focus on his analysis of the sublime within Conrad's work.

envisions the journey:

> You must first pass through the towns, then the villages, then the solitary huts of Indians; you must become the only person in your world; you must be the first to cut through the thongs of creepers; the first who has ever trodden upon the mosses by the river side, or seen trees which have stood since the beginning of the world. (*M*, 279)

She continues, detailing the absence of any marks that denote civilization, human presence:

> No longer are the sounds of men and women heard; no cart wheels sound upon distant roads; there are no lights upon the sky when the moon rises; never does any whistle sound, calling men to work and cease from work; only birds cry, and trees come down, and the fruit can be heard slipping and dropping on the ground; and now and then some beast howls in agony or rage. Wild creatures seeing you glitter their eyes at you from the branch, and the butterflies circle in your path. After traversing the forest for weeks and weeks and months and months, you come at last to a great grey screen of mountains. You are now encircled by the earth, in the very heart of stone and dust. (279–80)

Though the jungle space exists concurrently with modern societies, it conjures up images of a world untainted by civilization and calls us back to "the very heart of stone and dust."[41] With her representation of the primitive landscape, Woolf activates a primordial sense of awe in the reader rooted in the symbolic meanings conveyed by the landscape itself. The jungle, at once modern (in that it exists presently) and a thing of the past (in that it reminds one of a time before civilization), transforms into an atemporal space that invokes the sublime just as the ocean's expansive and extraterritorial nature does. Through the jungle sublime, we'll see how Rachel explores the troubling relationships between love, sex, and society in the only space she can: one where that society cannot and never did penetrate.

Interestingly enough, the introduction to the jungle chapter that appears in Woolf's final revision (what becomes *The Voyage Out*) substitutes the primordial, pre-civilization tones of the

[41] For comparison, the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* recalls that "going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. [. . .] We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet" (49, 51).

Melymbrosia draft with overtly imperial sentiments:

> Since the time of Elizabeth very few people had seen the river, and nothing has been done to change its appearance from what it was to the eyes of the Elizabethan voyagers. The time of Elizabeth was only distant from the present time by a moment of space compared with the ages which had passed since the water had run between those banks, and the green thickets swarmed there, and the small trees had grown to huge wrinkled trees in solitude. Changing only with the change of the sun and the clouds, the waving green mass had stood there for century after century, and the water had run between its banks ceaselessly, sometimes washing away earth and sometimes the branches of trees, while in other parts of the world one town had risen upon the ruins of another town, and the men in the towns had become more and more articulate and unlike each other. (*VO*, 264)

Nevertheless, Woolf invokes that similar sense of the grandiosity and vastness of time, contrasting it to the diminutive state of humanity's chronology. Time and nature become interwoven, signifying something unified and eternal that humanity can only ever hope to grasp at. In this sense, nature eschews the manmade fragmentations that come as byproducts to the historical development of society, which lends itself to Woolf's uses of nature as a unifying device. Although Woolf reminds us of the existence of colonizers and their attempts to tame foreign lands, the paragraph still leaves us feeling that little men in wooden ships can ultimately do nothing to destroy that impenetrable world of nature. In this light, Woolf's decision to draw Rachel into the jungle can be read as an attempt to permanently detach Raachel from the society that holds her back, through an experience of the sublime that should unburden and untether her. But this excursion instead leaves Rachel on a precarious edge—one which she is pushed off of by her encounter with the Othered women of a native village.

The atmosphere of the jungle poses a spiritual but also fundamentally existential danger to Rachel, who cannot both submit to courtship rituals—represented in the novel by the jungle excursion—and maintain her modernist sensibilities. As Rachel and Terence depart for their quick excursion, Hirst warns the couple to "beware of snakes" (270). Here Woolf resurrects the phallic symbol that first troubles Rachel after a profoundly disenchanting experience attending church:

"Her sense of safety was shaken," Woolf writes, "as if beneath twigs and dead leaves she had seen the movement of a snake" (263). Woolf intertwines this insistent sexual imagery with Rachel's increasing sense of doom.[42] "It seemed to her that a moment's respite was allowed, a moment's make-believe," but Rachel feels herself hurtling towards an inevitable ending preordained by "the profound and reasonless law": biology and sex categorization. Of course, Rachel's observation of a "reasonless law" extends far beyond sex categorization; it gestures towards the human impulse to classify and connect perceived patterns in the natural world, and the degree to which this instinct, combined with scientific advancement, has proven pernicious. These boundaries and categories are drawn somewhat arbitrarily to suit the prevailing hegemony of a given society—take race or sexuality as alternative examples. Hegemonies like England's imperialist patriarchy need this "reasonless law," require its misleading authority in order to justify the continued existence of their power structures. Woolf exposes the founding principles of hierarchical structures as grounded in human thought, not preordained nature.

These pervasive, far-reaching assumptions based on biology and science are too entrenched in sociopolitical life, giving rise to a spiritually disintegrating terror that Rachel and Terence carry with them when they temporarily diverge from the larger expedition group to trek deeper into the jungle together. Filled with myriad sights, sounds, and smells, the jungle accosts Rachel's being, threatens to compress her. As Rachel and Terence trek further into the undergrowth, "the lights grew dimmer" and "the path narrowed and turned," re-enacting the same constricted vaginal-like tunnel that Rachel walks through in her nightmare (after her encounter with Richard). With its "hot

[42] Terence, too, "saw that the time had come as it was fated to come," though unlike Rachel, he behaves calmly, a "master of himself" (269). Terence's contrasting response should come as no surprise, since immediately after their engagement he comfortably and—perhaps a little too quickly—takes on the role of patriarch, ordering Rachel around and ignoring anything she has to say.

steamy atmosphere, thick with scents" and laden with "dense creepers which knotted tree to tree,"[43] the sensory details of the jungle become nearly impassable and overwhelming. Replete with visual, auditory, and olfactory minutiae, Woolf's imagery neatly ties into Joseph Conrad's own "impenetrable forest" (49). The landscape's denseness yields an inscrutability that further recalls Burke's vision of the sublime, with its obscurity and privation (Burke 502). Woolf's primitive jungle is also burdened with sexual innuendos, from the "tropical bushes with their sword-like leaves," which the couple must pass along the path, to the sensual "sighing and creaking" that they perpetually hear overhead (*VO*, 270). The forest demands confrontation, like the air, which "came at them in languid puffs of scent," fortifying the claustrophobic space. By portraying the jungle as an over-eroticized suffocating space, Woolf illuminates the dark terrors of Rachel's interiority and strengthens the associations between the Austenian marriage plot and the implicit horrors that consume a woman's personhood.[44]

The conversations that Rachel and Terence have as they are obscured by undergrowth and far removed from the social pressures of the others reveal the intricate social rules that dictate the relations between an individual and their society. Rachel's profound but conflicted feelings for Terence help us realize the layered nature of human relations, and the difficulty of extricating ourselves from oppressive structures, even as we begin to perceive them. When Rachel meets Terence, he exhibits a similar modernist potential. The aura bubbles that Terence describes to Hirst echo Rachel's earlier fixation on the "bubbles which swam and clustered in her [tea]cup" and "seemed to her like the union of minds" (109, 56). Rachel later recalls these bubbles again when she feels "her small world becoming enlarged"; after Terence "suppose[es] [his] bubble could run

[43] These creepers recall the same one that "taps on the bedroom window" of couples on the English mainland (31), which reinforces the associations between the jungle's flora and domestic heteronormative life.

[44] To the extent that men were limited by patriarchal expectations of performed masculinity, a man's personhood was also affected—just not to the degree that a woman was denied her humanity.

into some one else's bubble" (89), he ponders for a moment and concludes, "'It would be an e—nor—mous world'" (109). Woolf connects Rachel and Terence's modernist spirits through these shared images, illustrating a profound relation between them that could potentially form a strong romantic bond.

Despite this intense connection and the couple's impassioned feelings for each other, the tentative architecture of Rachel's female bildungsroman begins to collapse. Though Terence and Rachel's conversation in the jungle centers heavily around love and articulating the love that they have for each other, their sentences are truncated, their emotivity stunted—"silence seemed to have fallen upon the world" (271). The stiffness and sparseness of their communication translates into a discomfiting artificiality, as "he did not seem to be speaking, or she to be hearing"; indeed, the whole scene takes place as if in a dream, with each character interacting as though they were "talking in [their] sleep" (272). While Woolf denies the Austenian reader the first mini-climax of the marriage plot—the admission of love—she also emphasizes the difficulty her modernist characters have with the dense sexual energy that presses on them from all sides. Despite the genuine love Rachel and Terence feel, they fail to find intimacy because their love is eclipsed by the social expectations that loom over their relationship, and especially their future together. To Rachel, the heterosexual dynamic poses a real threat to her freedom:

> "We love each other," Terence repeated, searching into her face. Their faces were both very pale and quiet, and they said nothing. He was afraid to kiss her again. By degrees she drew close to him, and rested against him. In this position they sat for some time. She said "Terence" once; he answered "Rachel." "Terrible—terrible," she murmured after another pause, but in saying this she was thinking as much of the persistent churning of the water as of her own feeling. On and on it went in the distance, the senseless and cruel churning of the water. (271–2)

Their physical intimacy is slight and hesitant, and what's more, compels Rachel to think of the far away "churning of the water." She ascertains the distance between herself in this compact, sexed-up jungle world and the free-flowing, invigorating water, which indicates that she also fully

perceives the danger her relationship to Terence will pose to her intellectual and spiritual freedom.

This realization creates a barrier of communication between them that gives rise to the suffocating muteness the couple experiences, despite the "sounds [that] stood out from the background making a bridge across their silence" (271). In her paper titled "Death and the Maiden Voyage: Mapping the Junction of Feminism and Postcolonial Theory in *The Voyage Out*," critic June Cummins discusses Rachel's voicelessness as one of three issues[45] that point to her "dual function as victim and victimizer" (206). Using Andrea Lewis's observation that the elite "interpreted the language of the lower classes either as falsehood, nonsense, or inaudible" (qtd. in Cummins, 206), Cummins argues that Rachel's self-censorship and the fact that she is silenced by others indicates an oppression parallel to that which the natives experienced at the hands of the colonizers. I dissect this further at the close of this section, but here I want to introduce the idea of silence in *The Voyage Out* as a form of language that responds to the traumas inflicted by a pervasive imperial-capitalist patriarchal system. The effects of a system built on the exploitation of certain groups of people oppressed because of identities they had no control over (race, gender, class) are so far-reaching—historically, culturally, socially—that their traumas become unspeakable, too inescapably colossal to articulate. Silence also functions as part of Woolf's modernist sublime, embodying the aesthetic of wonder, mystery, and power evoked by nature itself.

The imposing silence that cuts through this scene, forbidding the verbal consummation of Rachel and Terence's feelings, serves as a mourning of a love already sacrificed to the heterosexual relationship paradigm that upholds the very oppressive structures which Rachel and Terence's modernist sensibilities rally against. If their love must lead to marriage, which leads the woman to

[45] The other two issues are voyeurism and visions. I discuss the former later in this section.

domestic imprisonment, then where does that leave Rachel, who has insisted from the very beginning that she "shall never marry" (*VO*, 60), yet who nevertheless has fallen in love, and wants nothing more than to see the world expand through the unity of their two modernist bubbles? Through her sublime experience in the heart of the jungle, Rachel contends with these relationships between the individual and her society at large. Woolf demonstrates the impossibility of disentangling the private parts of our lives from the displays of power that afflict the public sphere. This inevitable connection between the private and public worlds also anticipates the argument Woolf would formulate in *Three Guineas*, where she pinpoints the roots of political fascism growing out of patriarchal soil—in the relationships between husbands and wives, fathers and daughters—and urges a necessary transformation of the gendered dynamics of English domestic life in order to reverse the corrupting effects of these relations on the public sphere.

After this harrowing revelation in the depths of the jungle, Rachel travels with her expedition party to a native village and encounters indigenous women in an interaction that culminates her understanding of her womanly fate. Cummins similarly identifies the native village as a finalization of Rachel's "ongoing dissipation of self that is initiated by patriarchy" (207). Other critics, too, have examined this scene through a dual feminist and postcolonial lens. While Constance S. Richards admits Woolf's "complicity [. . .] in the colonialism of England," she examines *The Voyage Out* as an articulation of what she terms "transnational feminism" (44), which expresses a "gender awareness that transcends cultural boundaries" and echoes the ethos of feminism's third wave (45). In her book *Hearts of Darkness: White Women Write Race* (2004), eminent Woolf scholar Jane Marcus excavates Woolf's progressive anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist stance and complicates it by examining Woolf's conflicted but strong identification as an Englishwoman. Marcus believes that Woolf "had a powerful political and economic analysis of

imperialism," but that she held "absolutely no understanding of the 'human character' of racial subjects—except as the experience of difference allowed her to construct herself" (4). Marcus characterizes the Other identity of indigenous and African people in Woolf's work as a mere "metaphor through which [Woolf] could explore the oppression of women." I return to these critics throughout the rest of this section, but for now let us begin with the perspectives of these feminist-postcolonial critiques in mind.

When the group first stumbles upon the native village, they initially go unnoticed and voyeuristically observe the indigenous women "who were squatting on the ground in triangular shapes, moving their hands, either plaiting straw or in kneading something in bowls" (*VO*, 284). This exoticizing gaze allows Rachel and her fellow expedition members to assume the position of subject, while the unsuspecting native women become the dehumanized objects by which the subjects may assert superiority over and distinguish themselves from. But the English tourists are robbed of this easy subject/object dichotomy when the natives notice them. Mr. Flushing steps forward to talk to an unnamed "lean majestic man," but the man's ability to equally appraise him unsettles Mr. Flushing, who feels that this man's "bones and hollows at once made the shapes of the Englishman's body appear ugly and unnatural." The indigenous women's "motionless inexpressive gaze" most unnerves the group—the stare unrelentingly "followed them as they walked"; even "the solemn eyes of babies regarded them, and old women stared out too." Woolf emphasizes the stare to such a degree that it takes on a life of its own and dismantles the English tourists, "passing over their legs, their bodies, their heads" (285). The gaze of the native women temporarily deadens their status as object and instead empowers them through access to subjectivity, which threatens the English group. If the objectified in a colonizer-colonized relationship gain personhood, this newfound subjectivity rattles the colonizer's complicity in

subjugation by revealing the morally reprehensible foundations of their behavior. More than that, "the ability to *be seen* is key to identity as a speaking subject in the modern world" (Marcus 21, emphasis in original). Terence's response to the incident is most telling: "'It makes us seem very insignificant, doesn't it?'" (285). As the two subjects are locked in a mutual gaze, they also engage in a struggle for dominance—that is, the conquest of one subject, which leads to the returned objectification of the Other.

Overall, Woolf notes that "the sight of the village indeed affected them all curiously though all differently." Each character may respond a little differently, but all the modernist-leaning characters are negatively impacted by what they witnessed: Hirst wanders off by himself to think "bitter and unhappy" thoughts; Helen "stand[s] by herself in the sunny space among the native women" and is "exposed to presentiments of disaster"; meanwhile the Victorian Flushings trivially argue about their age and "whether there were not signs here and there of European influence" (285–6). For Rachel in particular, this scene embodies—in the rawest form—the logical conclusion to her verbally inexpressible fears of sex, love, and heterosexual relationships: motherhood. The gaze of the indigenous women culminates with a display where one woman "drew apart her shawl and uncovered her breast to the lips of her baby," and all the while her eyes "never left [the English tourist's] faces" until they "finally turned away, rather than stand there looking at her any longer" (285). Rachel is suddenly struck by the understanding that "so it would go on for ever and ever [. . .] those women sitting under the trees, the trees and the river." Such an idea brings us back to the "mammoths who pastured in the fields of Richmond High Street," and Rachel's attempts to piece together the workings of civilization through the timeline of human history (67). The breastfeeding woman seems to stir in Rachel a realization of the biological constraints intrinsic to motherhood that have always existed and will not cease to exist.

Since the native village is framed by "an arch where the trees drew apart" (284), Rachel's encounter with this coarse idea of motherhood occurs under the phallic trees, which imply patriarchal authority. Rachel and Terence attempt to deceive themselves, "to assure each other once more that they were in love, were happy, were content." But Rachel cannot unsee or disconnect the dots: "Why was it so painful being in love, why was there so much pain in happiness?" she asks herself, as if she does not know (285). In this moment, Rachel is confronted by the social constraints of gender, and by the immutable world of biology that underpins patriarchal society's justification of gender roles and their corresponding hierarchy. Woolf's perception of genders that are constructed on the basis of sex presciently foreshadow the inquiries of our twenty-first century, where discourse has evolved to not only separate the two, but also to appraise and test the limits of each individually.

Woolf's manipulation of the indigenous woman as a symbol of primitive biology, combined with her representation of the jungle as an "untouched" barbaric space through which her protagonist may escape "civilized" society, at once holds the capacity for a proto-intersectional feminist critique *and* raises eyebrows. As I briefly mentioned earlier, some critics have contended with postcolonial readings of Virginia Woolf that test the limits of her anti-imperialism and question the reach of her feminism.[46] Before continuing with my own analysis, I review the insightful critical-historical perspectives that these critics have to offer.

In her essay "Virginia Woolf, Empire, and Race," Helen Carr states that "the possession of Empire was an integral part of Englishness," and indeed, for Woolf's lineage, this statement rings true despite her family's anti-slavery and pro-emancipation stances (198). Born in India, Woolf's

[46] Here I focus on postcolonialist feminist criticisms, but not on Woolf's independent feminism. For a comprehensive overview of feminist scholarship on Woolf, plus a brief outline of her complex relationship to the suffragist movement, see Laura Marcus's essay "Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf."

mother was descended from a family of long-serving colonialists, and her father's side of the family was no different (198). Even Woolf's husband Leonard worked as a colonial administrator, though as Wollaeger notes, he renounced the post and returned to live in London (33). Although Woolf vehemently opposed empire, Jane Marcus importantly points out that "she, too, was shaped by the same propaganda that demanded patriotic pity for raped and murdered Englishwomen and children" (7). Woolf's conscious opposition to imperialism on a removed theoretical level therefore did nothing to quell the subconscious influences of an imperial, colonialist society, which mitigated her ability to deeply empathize and engage with a colonized Other.[47] Moreover, the obvious separation of "a very fine negress" from the category of "woman"[48] in her feminist essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929)—and in *Orlando: A Biography,* too—demonstrates a troubling and indisputable gap between what Woolf perceived as a proper "woman" versus the black "negress," whose *–ess* implies femaleness but not the womanhood that the Englishwoman has such easy access to.

Still, others emphasize Woolf's radical connections of different oppressed identities even as they acknowledge the limitations of her portrayals of these nonwhite characters—though in the case of *The Voyage Out*, "symbols" might suit the caricatured representations of the indigenous women better than "characters." A counter-argument might point out that many of Woolf's characters in the novel serve as nothing more than caricatures of different generations of English people—which would not be incorrect, but misplaced in this discussion. Woolf's utilization of characters as symbolic should not deter us from interrogating the source of these associations and

[47] "The whites of Western eyes," Marcus writes, "have been so indelibly imprinted with images of black bodies as sexually charged with primitivist desire that only the West's most concerted effort to see whiteness everywhere seems to endow them with human character" (5).

[48] "It is one of the great advantages of being a woman that one can pass even a very fine negress without wishing to make an Englishwoman of her," Woolf writes (*Room,* 50). For a more in-depth analysis of this quote and how it relates to Woolf's perception of race relative to gender issues, see chapter two, "'A Very Fine Negress,'" in Marcus's book.

asking why, as Marcus has observed, both low and high modernism utilizes a very "specific procreative presence" sustained through the recurrent trope of the "erotic and maternal Black woman" (24). As she traces the history of feminism and its appropriation of slavery imagery—from Mary Wollstonecraft to John Stuart Mill—Marcus estimates that "the situation of subjugation of married Englishwomen up through the nineteenth century, in their legal powerlessness to control their own lives, looked comparable to the situation of slaves" (25).[49] We can draw this conclusion out further if we consider Rachel Vinrace's anxieties about enslavement at the hands of her own body—a biological constraint that was physically inescapable but also used as a tool of political subjugation. The native women, though not yet entirely crushed by the hand of colonialism, are still trapped by their own bodies and the inescapable path of motherhood; Woolf's reduction of their bodies to symbols of female biology reveals precisely the kind of fate that Rachel most fears. Woolf's employment of the indigenous female body as an exploration of the connections between biology and enslavement ultimately illustrates the sheltered middle-class ignorance of a woman residing at the heart of a homogenous English social circle, whose meaningful day-to-day interactions likely excluded indigenous people or people of color.

Let us now examine the ways in which Woolf relates Rachel's position to that of the natives. June Cummins argues against Andrea Lewis's reading of Rachel living unaware of her implicit participation as a white bourgeois woman in imperial structures; she asserts that "Rachel *is* aware of her role but unable to articulate this awareness," and that this tension between what Rachel knows but cannot express leads to her death at the end of the novel (205). Cummins then explores how Rachel straddles the line as both oppressor and oppressed. Constance S. Richards

[49] She also recognizes the argument that "women, like slaves, could not be allowed to own property since they were property" (26)—a perspective Woolf espouses consistently in *Three Guineas*. Among other things, Woolf was "anxious to attribute the desire to own human beings, trees, and dogs, to men alone."

furthers this line of thought: she claims Woolf maintains a "strategic deployment of gender awareness that crosses cultural boundaries, even as they demonstrate Rachel's distance from these women" (45), and that *The Voyage Out* reads as a "transnational feminist response" to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (46). While I agree with Cummins's idea that Rachel—and perhaps, by extension, Woolf—could perceive but not quite communicate these patriarchal-imperialist threads, I hesitate to accept Richards's idea that Woolf's first novel was consciously transnational. Nevertheless, both of these critics focus on the theme of silence in *The Voyage Out*, which I would like to further explore.

Woolf clothes her natives in a protective silence that rejects traditional Western modes of speech. It is a silence that, paired with the natives' unflinching gaze, begins to recognize the "alienation and the objectification of the colonized" (Richards 45). Silence thus expresses a pain that is at once unknowable to the English colonizer's experience and profoundly inexpressible through conventional modes of speech. "Silencing in Woolf's *The Voyage Out* is not a diminution of indigenous being," Richards writes, "but rather a strategy of resistance against the appropriation of difference. [. . . Woolf] appreciat[es] the everyday reality of the indigenous women [. . .] without imposing Western feminist ideology upon them." While Richards's contention that Woolf does not politicize her indigenous subjects surely seems misplaced in a novel whose aim is highly political, the notion of silence as a form of resistance merits further examination—especially considering Rachel's decision to recede into silence at the end of the novel. The natives do not speak as the Englishmen and women do, but they have other modes of communication that are unintelligible—and a bit frightening—to the intruding tourists. "If [the natives] spoke," Woolf writes, "it was to cry some harsh unintelligible cry"; "voices rose when a child was beaten, and fell again; voices rose in song, which slid up a little way and down a little way, and settled again

upon the same low and melancholy note" (*VO*, 285). Woolf's emphasis on the natives' paralanguage and use of song echoes Rachel's own alternative modes of communication and difficulties with the solid words of the English language. Silence and music thus become alternative forms of language, loaded with a subversive potential that rejects hegemonic structures of meaning-making and expression. Through silence, Woolf effectively links the plight of the colonized, objectified women with that of the Englishwoman.

Though Woolf's criticism of imperialist patriarchy is certainly flawed in its own form of privileged objectification of the colonized woman, I want to point out the significance of even connecting the two struggles. By relating the colonial project abroad to the patriarchal one, even obliquely, Woolf begins to probe the complex ways in which power structures function: on many levels, to oppress many groups. Woolf's exploration is one that anticipates the ideas intersectional feminism would explore in the twenty-first century. While we cannot call hers a deliberate "transnational feminism," we can appreciate her attempts to understand the full scope of her national identity and the hegemonic hierarchies that underpin it. Her piercing explorations of these intersecting institutions and their victims paved the way for her work in *Three Guineas*, where Woolf acknowledges and tries to truthfully contend with her more privileged position in English society relative to other women.

VI. A Transient Storm, Eternally Arriving

As Woolf steers Rachel straight into the marriage plot of an Austenian sitting-room drama, the female bildungsroman unravels at the seams. Rachel's narrative of promise and potentiality languishes unattended as her romantic commitment to Terence displaces—or rather clashes with—her coming-of-age story. Once Rachel's fate is sealed through her official engagement to Terence, the experimental female bildungsroman Woolf envisioned for her heroine must recede to allow the completion of the traditional romance arc. Rachel's desires and ambitions shrink and wither as the imposing figure of her love-interest-turned-patriarch shadows over her. Her artistic pursuits are hindered, her intellectual thoughts diminished, and her personhood assaulted by a social institution that demands conformity to a narrow identity. By nestling the story of her protagonist at the junction of two opposing genres—the traditionally "male" bildungsroman and the "female" sitting-room drama—Woolf achieves a social critique grounded in the structure of the novel itself. From this conflict of genres, the corrupted bildungsroman thus emerges and illustrates the dimensions of Woolf's political vision.

The marriage plot asphyxiates Rachel's spiritual-intellectual development, but once initiated, it demands completion. Woolf could have followed the style of preceding female novelists and cleanly merged the dimensions of her female coming-of-age story with the social demands of the drawing-room drama, but *The Voyage Out* is a different project. With it, Woolf desires to meet the male bildungsroman in its own territory. While *The Voyage Out* challenges the gendered limits of the bildungsroman, it also defiantly ruptures the conventions of the literary drawing room, moving beyond Austen's thought-provoking satire, and even beyond the alternative that Charlotte Brontë offered when she left Lucy Snow's relationship unconsummated at the end

of *Villette*.[50] Woolf denies the reader any ambiguity about Rachel's situation—she has died, she will never marry, destined to remain a drowned virgin, like Milton's river nymph, Sabrina. In this section, I examine the deterioration of Rachel's corrupted bildungsroman, and explore the political implications of Woolf's irreconcilable narrative, which culminates in Rachel's death.

Immediately after her experiences in the depths of the jungle, Rachel struggles to reconcile her roaming thoughts and desire for exploration with Terence's needy monopolization of her attention. Returning from the jungle to the town of Santa Marina, Terence and Rachel sit on the deck of the steamer and absorb the nighttime. Rachel fixates on the "little points of frosty light infinitely far away," the only source of light in the "great black world [that] lay around them," and Terence soon grows anxious (289). "'You've forgotten completely about me,'" he reproachfully reminds her, then adds, "'and I never forget about you.'" Rachel denies this, and tries to explain, but Woolf does not even give her a proper voice except through the narrator's free indirect speech: "she had not forgotten, only the stars—the night—the dark." Before Rachel can elaborate on these fragmented thoughts, Terence devalues her ideas because he cannot understand her. He interrupts her musings and tells her that she is "'like a bird half asleep in its nest.'" Woolf again associates this dreamy state with Rachel, but through the chiding, increasingly patriarchal voice of Terence. "'You're asleep. You're talking in your sleep,'" he insists to Rachel, and though we know the power of Rachel's reveries, Terence rejects them and introduces the new reality Rachel will contend with—one where the essence of her being will constantly be attacked and at odds with the demands of her marriage. The couple's strained connection in this scene prefigures the transformed

[50] In the final chapter of *Villette*, Lucy describes the three years she spent waiting for her lover, M. Emanuel, to return from abroad: "Reader, they were the three happiest years of my life. Do you scout the paradox? Listen" (493). Lucy writes of a storm that "did not cease till the Atlantic was strewn with wrecks" and then stops herself so that she may "leave sunny imaginations hope" (495). "Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life," Lucy insists, though her lover's implied death at sea is clear.

dynamic that Woolf presents a few pages later, after their official engagement. Rachel still pursues her musical ambitions, attempting to climb "up and up the steep spiral of a very late Beethoven sonata," but Terence's obnoxious thinking aloud distracts Rachel immensely (291). "'Here am I, the best musician in South America, not to speak of Europe and Asia,'" Rachel angrily asserts, "'and I can't play a note because of you in the room interrupting me every other second'" (292). But Terence, who cannot conceive of his wife-to-be as existing for any purpose beyond fulfilling his needs, remarks matter-of-factly, "'You don't seem to realise that that's what I've been aiming at for the last half-hour. [. . .] I've no objection to nice, simple tunes—indeed, I find them very helpful to literary composition" (292). Terence denies Rachel's ambitions, and instead assumes that her piano-playing is supposed to serve as background music to help him concentrate on his work.

Rachel tries to break out of this caricatured existence, but is met with resistance from Terence that saps her of energy. So while Terence works freely on his novel,[51] Rachel dutifully sets herself to the task of answering congratulatory letters from friends. Rachel "write[s] laboriously" (295), struggling to conform to her one-dimensional role, to "produce phrases which bore a considerable likeness to those which she had condemned" (296). Woolf assures us after their engagement that "apparently it was not anything unusual that had happened," but the adverb "apparently" adds a sardonic tone to the statement (290). In conjunction with the foreboding tone of the previous passage, wherein the encroaching darkness "poured down profusely" on Rachel and Terence on the boat deck, Woolf's comment draws attention to the disturbing effects of marriage and the absurd normalization of a social ritual that leaves both men and women "with

[51] Notably, after the engagement, Woolf writes that Terence's novel, which would have been called *Silence*, "would not now be the same book that it would have been" (291). Again, Woolf circles around the notion of silence as an alternative language of resistance against hegemony, and Terence's concession to the marriage plot determines that he can no longer write a novel about "the things people don't say" (216).

scarcely any feeling of life" (289). By juxtaposing Rachel and Terence's relationship immediately pre- and post-engagement, Woolf demonstrates how Victorian social indoctrination necessarily suffocates the individual and particularly eclipses the woman's personhood.

As the marriage plot wears on, Woolf contrasts Rachel's stubborn individuality against Terence's willing acceptance of the Victorian relationship paradigm they act out. Rachel's "vague sense of dissatisfaction" reveals her uncompromised self-awareness of the gender dynamic that has seized her relationship with Terence (302). Rachel's essence has not changed; her abstract perceptions—of the world as "vast blocks of matter" and people as "patches of light"—remain with her, but are truncated by Terence's waxing poetic (292, 293). Both budding modernists revert to their respective gender roles, but whereas Rachel is thrust into submissive femininity, Terence the patriarch steps into his masculinity as a colonizer sets foot on the continent he will conquer, as a just-crowned king would approach his throne. "'I feel solid; immensely solid,'" Terence says, resisting Rachel's attempts at abstract expression, "'the legs of my chair might be rooted in the bowels of the earth'" (293). The constructions of Victorian patriarchy have ensnared Terence, who fondly reminisces about life at Cambridge;[52] he appears all-too-pleased with his dominant position in this anachronistic but male-empowering social hierarchy. Though he claims he wants to marry Rachel so they can "be free together," Terence's language betrays persistent subconscious patriarchal inclinations: "'I'd keep you free,'" he tells Rachel, foreshadowing his transformation to patriarch (244). Through Terence, Woolf reminds us that even males who aspire to modernist worldviews can and will return to the power structures that sustain them. Such an observation also lends credence to the idea Woolf proposes in *Three Guineas*, regarding the creation of an

[52] "'But at Cambridge,'" he tells Rachel, "'I can remember, there were times when one fell into ridiculous states of semi-coma about five o'clock in the morning'" (293). Let us also remember Mr. Pepper and Mr. Ambrose, sitting in the living room of the *Euphrosyne* and chatting as if "they were in Cambridge, and it was probably about the year 1875" (18).

Outsiders' Society run by women. Although Rachel seeks the meaning and happiness that "was apparent in the lives of her aunts, in the brief visit of the Dalloways [. . .] and in the life of her father," she oscillates uncertainly in her thought processes (314). "'The blue—always blue sky, blue sea,'" she complains, rejecting the infinite expanses that characterize her essence, but quickly changes her mind: "she wanted many more things than the love of one human being—the sea, the sky" (302). Rachel appears increasingly tortured by a cognitive dissonance that prevents her from performing her role. But simultaneously trapped in a coming-of-age narrative and a fictional social world that will not permit the realization of such a story, Rachel is doomed to passivity and half-formed objections.

At certain moments, Rachel has visibly given up, and attempts to numb herself in preparation for the life she sees imminently approaching: "For the moment she was as detached and disinterested as if she had no longer any lot in her life and she thought that she could now accept anything that came to her" (315). Critics have interpreted Rachel's passivity as the only form of resistance reasonably available to the trapped woman in the Edwardian era. Christine Froula negates the significance of Rachel's physical being, arguing instead that Woolf "represent[s] not the death of the body but the symbolic death that her heroine undergoes when she finds no language in which to live" (85). But Woolf's emphasis on female biology and, most importantly, Rachel's discomfort in her own body, appears at odds with Froula's contention. I suggest instead that Woolf sacrifices Rachel's corporeality so that her modernist spirit may live on. As we'll see, Rachel's physical death in the novel enables her symbolic birth—one in which her spirit is released and allowed to merge with the expansive and fluid landscape that has carried her afloat for much of the novel.

In the crucial moments before Rachel's illness strikes, Woolf employs the landscape as a

mirror of Rachel's interior state of decay. Woolf opens the chapter with the sweltering afternoon, which was "so hot that the breaking of the waves on the shore sounded like the repeated sigh of some exhausted creature" (326). Let us pause here—at this sentence, placed strategically at the opening of the chapter where Rachel falls sick. In this sentence alone, Woolf signals Rachel's imminent illness through the fatigue of the waves. The ocean has served as an energizing force through the entire novel, an entity whose liminal fluidity and boundless eternity provided Rachel with spiritual vigor—and the heat has diminished this great force into "some exhausted creature." But let us go on. The heat sweeps over the landscape, sparing nothing from its spell of dryness: "the air danced perpetually over the short dry grass"; "the red flowers [. . .] were drooping with the heat"; "the white blossoms [. . .] were now dry, and their edges were curled and yellow." The torrid atmosphere oppresses every living thing, including Rachel and Terence, who—even sitting in the shade of the terrace—found it "too hot to talk." Here I want to return to the idea that Rachel holds a psychic connection to the landscapes that form a semiotics in the novel. Woolf's symbology allows us to read the overbearing heat of the atmosphere as a reflection of Rachel's own parched soul. The prohibitive, suppressive nature of her conventionally feminine role already withers Rachel, and on the patio, she becomes much like the wilting plant life around her. This symbology then feeds into the novel's forming semiotics to articulate a radically dissenting position against the existing English society.

But the heat of the environment alone does not induce Rachel's debilitating illness. As Terence reads aloud a poem to Rachel, her sense of discomfort amplifies to a fever pitch. Woolf utilizes John Milton's[53] poem "Comus, a Mask," which was ostensibly written in honor of the Earl

[53] Born two centuries before Romanticism appeared, Milton nevertheless served as a significant inspiration for the Romantics. In his treatise on the sublime, Burke refers to Milton's *Paradise Lost* as a pellucid example of the elements he perceives crucial to the sublime aesthetic.

of Bridgewater. However, Woolf employs the poem in *The Voyage Out* for its allusion to the Anglo-Saxon myth of the river nymph Sabrina, which Milton in turn borrows from Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.[54] Below I have reproduced the first stanza Woolf uses:

> *There is a gentle nymph not far from hence,*
> *That with moist curb sways the smooth Severn stream.*
> *Sabrina is her name, a virgin pure;*
> *Whilom she was the daughter of Locrine,*
> *That had the sceptre from his father Brute.*

In the asphyxiating heat of the afternoon, when "it was not easy to find any book that would withstand the power of the sun," Woolf introduces an allusion that reflects Rachel's struggles both broadly and specifically. Emulating the thematic questions of *Faerie Queene*, Milton's poem explores "the war between the body and soul" (Bell)—a conflict which Rachel Vinrace also deeply contends with as her soul comes of age in a body deemed unsuitable by society for spiritual growth. But Woolf's specific reference to Sabrina, "a virgin pure" whom the brothers of the poem summon to preserve the chastity of their sister, provides us with an answer to the body/soul bifurcation.

Woolf's invocation of the myth of Sabrina the river nymph, positioned right before the protagonist's contraction of an incurable illness, forms part of a larger project of intertextuality[55] in *The Voyage Out,* which in turn contributes to the meta-structural framework that sustains the novel. Like her manipulation of literary genres, Woolf's reliance on other texts reveals the innately political tinge that characterized her artistic and intellectual endeavors. Indeed, though Woolf's feminist activism waned, her commitment to exploring contemporary political issues pervades her oeuvre (Laura Marcus 144). "Thinking is my fighting," Woolf once wrote (*The Death of the*

[54] According to William Bell, Milton proclaimed that Spenser was his master.
[55] In her essay "Spatialization, Narrative Theory, and Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*," Susan Friedman writes that the "novel uses constant dialogue with other literary texts" (123). Indeed, whether through allusions or direct quotations, Woolf's employment of intertextuality crucially informs her project.

Moth).[56] The literary techniques and structures employed in *The Voyage Out* call attention to a radical political vision at the core of the story—one which surveys the history of England's sociopolitical landscape through the annals of English literature, and concludes that the imperial-patriarchal enterprise leaves little room for the existence of women in non-feminine-coded roles and narratives, whether in fiction or real life. We can therefore read, as Woolf does, culture and its representations as symptomatic—even representative—of the sociopolitical situation. Yet Woolf's evaluation of art's inclusivity to outsider voices, and therefore, its power to effect change in society, betrays a sense of hope. Through her career and especially during periods of global conflict, Woolf argues for culture as one pacifist form of resistance available especially to women and social outsiders: a "mental fight," which "means thinking against the current, not with it (*Death of the Moth*, 155). Even as literature and art largely reflect the dominant cultural and political norms, they are fraught with a progressive potentiality that the oppressed may harness in dissent.

But Woolf's attempts to build a new literary tradition fail in this novel, signaling that her contemporary society still lacked the supportive foundations in place for women to advance in culture and public life. Published three years before women's first landmark suffrage gains, *The Voyage Out* was written under a context that didn't even yet allow women the right to vote, and although Woolf believed the suffrage movement was "too narrow a cause" to focus on in the feminist struggle, the absence of this basic right at the time of *The Voyage Out*'s publication implies just how regressive Rachel's fictional social world must have been (Laura Marcus 144). Moreover, the failure of Woolf's experiments in combining the preexisting conventions implies a necessary break with the behemoths of English literature, something which Woolf contends with

[56] "There is another way of fighting for freedom without arms," she writes, addressing Englishwomen specifically: "We can fight with the mind" (154).

throughout her career—especially in *Orlando*—and in her feminist politics as well.[57]

As the narrative of *The Voyage Out* locks its protagonist in an inescapable arc, Woolf must make an authorial decision: force Rachel to submit to the constraints of the patriarchal story, or resist? Woolf's novel aims for a radical, permanent break from the establishment, so she chooses the latter. But in this world, her protagonist cannot resist; no precedent exists in the history of English heroines. To crack the mold of the heroine's domestic-development storytelling arc, Woolf therefore must fissure the narrative itself to create a chasm through which Rachel may escape. The allusion to Milton's Sabrina initiates this disruption. When Terence reads the song used to invoke Sabrina, rescuer of virgins and protector of maidenhood—

> *Sabrina fair,*
> *Listen where thou art sitting*
> *Under the glassy, cool, translucent wave, In twisted braids of lilies knitting*
> *The loose train of thy amber dropping hair, Listen for dear honour's sake,*
> *Goddess of the silver lake, Listen and save!*

—Rachel's destiny is finalized and her illness descends: "her head ached; it ached whichever way she turned it" (*VO*, 327). Although Rachel cannot be conscious of her looming deathbed, Woolf torments Rachel's psyche with an incomprehensible meaning (or rather a meaning that is comprehensible only to Woolf and her readers) that begins with Milton's poem. Rachel finds it "painful to listen to [the words]," which "sounded strange" and "laden with meaning," but a meaning that differs from "what [words] usually meant" (326). Contrasting the withering ambience of the dry landscape with the "refreshingly cool" nature of Sabrina's underwater life, Woolf induces a moment of rupture in Rachel's bildungsroman (329). Woolf's distortion of the landscape

[57] Woolf did not deny the importance of these traditions to their own respective epochs, but insisted in essays like "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" and "Modern Fiction" that modernism had to take steps beyond the bounds of previous traditions and articulate something entirely new in order to forge ahead. Her political stances were more complicated, and as Laura Marcus notes, Woolf oscillated between what Naomi Black termed "social feminism"—which was predicated on ideas of *difference* between the sexes—and the traditional "equal rights" feminism (145).

during Rachel's illness further emphasizes Woolf's attempts to create a parallel semiotic metalanguage of potential and Otherness that we may trace to Rachel's character and extrapolate to Woolf's larger political aims. "The trees were either too near or too far," Woolf writes, just as Rachel realizes that "her head almost certainly ached" (327). Rachel's agitated response encourages the reader to connect Sabrina's aquatic life "under the glassy, cool, translucent wave" with the same eternal waterscapes that mesmerize Rachel, characterize her being, and form a symbology of potentiality in the novel.

Through Sabrina, the drowned everlasting virgin, Woolf offers a glimpse into Rachel's alternative existence, and leads the reader to a conclusion that Rachel's confining corporeal state cannot coexist with her expansive soul in this patriarchal world. To remain a virgin, pure of the hegemonic impositions of motherhood that taint other women like Helen, Rachel must follow Sabrina to another world, beyond reality and literature: a metaphysical world of myths and symbols. Rachel's body must therefore be sacrificed to preserve her modernist spirit, to crystallize it for future generations like Evelyn Murgatroyd.[58] As the reader is confronted with a choice between the Victorian reality (a corporeal life that necessitates a psychic death) and no reality (a physical death that allows spiritual life), Woolf pulls her protagonist out of her fictional world in a radical authorial decision that at once derails the bildungsroman *and* the sitting-room drama.

In this fever state, the symbology of the torrid landscape and of Rachel's aqueous dreamscape combine to form a metalanguage through which we can understand the mechanisms

[58] Evelyn Murgatroyd is part of the novel's cast of Edwardians, a generation caught between the anachronistic Victorians and the modernist Georgians. Woolf formally introduces Evelyn as she's mounting a mule and "[rising] light as a bubble to her seat," immediately connecting her spirit to the modernist bubbles that both Rachel and Terence rely on to express their thoughts (128). An energetic political activist, Evelyn's character holds an independent fighting spirit that, by the end of the novel, seems poised to inherit the revolutionary modernist spirit that budded in Rachel. Evelyn refuses to marry any of the men that are interested in her, and Woolf imbues her character with a sort of masculinity that implies Evelyn does not fit the obedient mold of Victorian femininity and in no way will she submit her future to its constraints.

that propel this ending and the social criticism that forms the underbelly of *The Voyage Out*. As Rachel's illness worsens, she is "completely cut off and unable to communicate with the rest of the world," which provides cool relief to her parched soul (330). The delirium hews a "gulf between her world and the ordinary world which she could not bridge," separating Rachel from her body (329). She loses touch with the sensory experiences of her real world, and when someone tucks her in, "Rachel [does] not realise that the toe [is] hers" (331). In this authorial godsend of illness, Woolf also shapes an underwater psychic space where Rachel's spirit may retreat as it begins to tear apart from the body that entraps her both literally—as it keeps her in this society—and figuratively—as her sex predetermines her life trajectory.

The aquatic imagery that increasingly floods Rachel's reveries signals her body's imminent surrender and release of her soul to the symbology of the water and landscapes: "The glassy, cool, translucent wave" of Milton's poem "was almost visible before her, curling up at the end of the bed" (329). As Rachel's liminal world intersects more with her physical reality, we feel a resolution on the horizon, until "she [falls] into a deep pool of sticky water, which eventually close[s] over her head" (341). Soon her senses only identify the feelings of an underwater world—"she saw nothing and heard nothing but a faint booming sound, which was the sound of the sea rolling over her head." Woolf then writes that "she was not dead, but curled up at the bottom of the sea." Here, Rachel crosses the threshold, experiencing what constitutes a psychic flight from her body that leaves her without "any will of her own" (346). Rachel's last experience of her own body occurs after "the wave was replaced by the side of a mountain," and "her body became a drift of melting snow, above which her knees rose in huge peaked mountains of bare bone." In Rachel's mind, her body transforms, melts into the landscape. The rest of her surroundings begin to metamorphose, losing the rigidity of reality as "the room also ha[s] an odd power of expanding"

(347). At last, Rachel's mind has been "driven to some remote corner of her body, or escaped and gone flitting round the room" (347).

Although Rachel lacks full awareness of her situation, Woolf still imbues Rachel's persistent hallucinations with a vague meaning that looms in her mind:

> For six days indeed she had been oblivious of the world outside, because it needed all her attention to follow the hot, red, quick sights which passed incessantly before her eyes. [. . .] The sights were all concerned in some plot, some adventure, some escape. The nature of what they were doing changed incessantly, although there was always a reason behind it, which she must endeavour to grasp. Now they were among trees and savages, now they were on the sea, now they were on the tops of high towers; now they jumped; now they flew. But just as the crisis was about to happen, something invariably slipped in her brain, so that the whole effort had to begin over again. (341)

Pushing towards self-awareness and metaphysical understanding of structures she cannot fathom, Rachel's intuitive probes for the systems that shape her life allow the reader to grasp Woolf's meaning, which has heretofore been embedded in the novel's symbology of landscapes. While Rachel cannot apprehend the full force that propels the injustices of her world, the Georgian fever trope allows Rachel to at least puncture through the pretenses of her Victorian reality and expose those around her as complicit members of the hegemonic system just beyond her understanding. The other characters, or "the faces," that surround her reside too firmly within the contrived social world, but the "hot, red quick sights," which Rachel finds of "enormous importance" to understand, exist in a different world altogether (340). The faces worry Rachel "because they distracted her attention and she might miss the clue" (341).

More than that, the other characters who flit in and out of the room to check on and care for Rachel become "her tormenters," willing participants in the world that she desires escape from. When Helen brings Nurse McInnis into the room, Rachel realizes "she had seen her in the chapel" (330). Here Woolf refers back to Rachel's "acute state of discomfort" when she attends Mr. Bax's

sermon and finds that her lofty conceptions of spirituality are at odds with the artificial "atmosphere of forced solemnity" that other characters acquiesce to "without knowing or caring" (228). Woolf connects the matronly, guardian figure of Nurse McInnis to a pillar institution of patriarchal society. As Nurse McInnis watches over her body, Rachel's eyes become "fixed upon the peaked shadow on the ceiling" cast by her attendant: "All her energy was concentrated upon the desire that this shadow should move," Woolf observes (331). The shadow comes to embody the inherent masculine presence that hovers over women, and Rachel desires deeply that it should disappear, "but the shadow and the woman seemed to be eternally fixed above her." Her feelings upon seeing Terence reflect a similar understanding of his role in her oppression: the mere "sight of Terence was the greatest effort" to Rachel (347). When Terence visits Rachel and kisses her, she imagines a woman slicing a man's head off with a knife (339).

Through every psychic precipice Rachel transcends and every epiphanic moment that characterizes her bildungsroman, Woolf leaves Rachel on the verge, in death as in life. Rachel's intellectual and spiritual growth finds no boundary, no point which it may call an arrival at absolute knowledge or understanding, while she lives. She is perpetually striving to trace roads back to their beginnings, to envision the connecting threads of life, to see—as Woolf writes in "A Sketch of the Past"—the flower as part of the whole earth. In her death, this energy of potentiality allows her to become part of the symbolic landscape. At the end of the novel, a thunderstorm passes over the Santa Marina hotel and its sitting-room inhabitants. The sudden deluge inundates the remaining characters with sensory details that exert a "pressure and restraint" on the people and "waves of darkness across the earth" (368). Reminiscent of the semiotics of sensuality that characterized Rachel's experiences, this storm embodies her modernist spirit in its expansive, sublime glory. Despite the apparent intensity and darkness of the storm, it passes over the hotel quickly, almost

leaving something to be desired. Rachel's symbolic existence, too, is one predicated on the future and its possibilities.

This characterization of Rachel's bildungsroman as perpetually unfinished is crucial to our understanding of Woolf's project with *The Voyage Out*. Rachel's death serves as a material critique of a society which did not permit women the same opportunities as their male counterparts, but the novel also metaphysically allows Rachel that opportunity. Through the symbolic rebirth—predicated on the idea of the Georgian fever trope as offering a sort of cleansing rebirth—Woolf liberates Rachel from literary traditions whose narratives perpetuate the injustices of patriarchal hegemony. The landscape's symbology of potentiality is crucial to understanding Rachel's death not necessarily as a failure, but rather as an expression of blooming potential for future generations. Eternally married to the sublime landscape, Rachel's spirit gives life and validation to Woolf's artistic and political project of "permanent revolution."

A Note on Pronouns in Orlando: A Biography

This note appears before part two to orient the reader and help introduce them to pronoun alternatives that exist outside the gender binary of he/she. Grammatically, "they/them" can be used to refer to a singular subject when their gender is unknown—as I have demonstrated in the first sentence above in my address to the reader. We should therefore set aside the grammatical impulse to deem the alternative use of "they" in the context of gender studies an "incorrect" usage, and instead realize that this desire to retain the he/she dichotomy reflects a hegemonic cultural education more than a grammatical one.

As I discuss the protagonist Orlando, I refer to them using three different pronouns: he, she, and they. Orlando is called "he" when I analyze passages in the novel where his gender is male; "she" when I analyze passages in the novel where her gender is female; and I use the gender-neutral pronoun "they" to refer to Orlando more broadly, when there is no specific textual context in which I discuss them (as in this sentence).

PART TWO

"Where the sunsets are longer, the dawns less sudden"

A helter-skelter romp across historical and national boundaries, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) records the fictional biography of an aspiring English poet and nobleman whose story Woolf begins in 1588 and ends in 1928. In the Vintage Classics edition of *Orlando,* Helen Dunmore calls the novel "a statement about human capacity, and about daring to reach beyond what appears possible" (xviii). Indeed, Orlando's story is filled with impossible movements and transcendence—they fluidly navigate from male to female, from rich to poor, from hetero- to bisexual. Floating on the currents of the changing zeitgeist of three centuries of English history, the eponymous hero(ine) of *Orlando* revives Rachel's indefinable, transcendent spirit, giving new life to the "failed" heroine of Woolf's first novel. If Rachel Vinrace's body died because the material constraints of the Victorian-novel conventions could not sustain her character development, then Woolf reincarnates her liminal soul in the body of Orlando, whose identity and spatiotemporal geography remains uncontainable through the end of the novel. This part of my thesis juxtaposes the literary strategies in *Orlando* with those of *The Voyage Out* in order to trace a continuity of political-artistic vision centered on potentiality and expressed through Orlando's character and in the novel's ultimately uncategorizable form.

I. "I am nature's bride": Rachel's Symbology Revisited

The spirits of Rachel Vinrace and Orlando find common ground through the sense of potentiality and artistic existential longing that Woolf imbues them with. Orlando's overwhelming desire to ask a poet he encounters to "tell me [. . .] everything in the whole world" finds a similar urgency and vitality in Rachel's "please—tell me everything," which she wants to say to Richard (*O*, 11; *VO*, 56). A scene in *Melymbrosia* also suggests the connections between Rachel and Orlando. Rachel thinks of an old fairy tale of a wanderer who travels about, asking different people the same question. "'And that,' said Rachel, 'is exactly what has happened to me'" (269). Woolf elaborates, "[Rachel] was the traveler, and she went not only from person to person, but from country to country and from age to age, asked her question: in the streets of Baghdad she asked it of men sitting by the roadside, and now in the city of London; she asked it of the Greeks and of the Italians, of poems and of music." With its wandering character and its lack of concrete place, this fable parallels Orlando's restless journey across time and space.

Yet Orlando is not, as we'll see, just a reiteration of the same character; Woolf allows them to float on the waves of possibility where Rachel eventually had to sink. We can read Orlando as a character who fulfills Rachel's spirit by evading societal convention through what Jessica Berman observes as a transnational-and-transgender narrative.[59] Orlando experiences some of Rachel's most vivid daydreams and wistful imaginings of herself. Let us recall Rachel's Orientalist dream of being "a Persian princess far from civilization, riding her horse upon the mountains alone" (*VO*, 155). This fantasy comes to life in *Orlando*, where our eponymous protagonist departs

[59] I use dashes to connect the words "transnational" and "transgender" because Berman's uses of these words rely on their connection and "common valences" as expressed through the prefix "trans" (219).

on a donkey to live with a band of gypsies in the mountains "far from [. . .] the strife of men and women" (*VO,* 155). When Orlando was a man working as the ambassador of Great Britain in Constantinople, surrounded by the duty and bureaucracy of his political position, a desire to escape seized him, too: "Often [he] had looked at those mountains from [his] balcony at the Embassy; often [he] had longed to be there" (*O,* 98). I return to this point later, but as in this case with the Romantic mountains in the distance, Orlando's longings are often tied to the sublime landscape. After her gender change, Orlando actually takes the identity transformation as an opportunity to reinvent herself and flee to another life. Her status as a transient being, both in terms of her identity and her spatiotemporal geography, elevates her above restrictive "spirits of the age" so that she may evade the withering constraints that kept Rachel from fulfilling her roaming desires.

Woolf expresses the existential yearnings of both protagonists through the same symbology of landscapes that first appears in *The Voyage Out*. Some critics have explored Woolf's use of nature in *Orlando* in ways that somewhat intersect with my own interpretation. Jody R. Rosen has argued for a multiply gendered understanding of nature that parallels the novel's rejection of a binary gender model for the protagonist. She roots this analysis in what she perceives as the "eroticized interactions between Orlando and the natural world," which "reemphasize the instability of naturalized gender and gender roles" by eschewing conventional categorizations of nature as simply feminine (153–4). As Helena Feder analyzes Orlando's wandering romps across time and geography, she reads the narrative as "a passage between, and enfolding of, Romanticism and Modernism" (78). According to Feder, *Orlando* also challenges the Enlightenment idea of rationalism by "exposing the absurdity of rationalism and the assumption of human superiority at its core" (77). Feder's reading reinforces my own claims that Woolf is working within a modernist sublime aesthetic borrowed from the Romantics. As I examine Orlando's affinity for nature in

their quest for existential and artistic fulfillment, we should keep in mind the Romantic reverence and "astonishment" towards nature. But I also want to point out the ways in which nature allows Orlando solitude and space away from civilization, thereby suggesting that fulfillment—as well as creative production—requires a separation from imposing societal forces.

Exalted by the sights of nature—"the birds and the trees [. . .] the evening sky, the homing rooks"—Orlando "mount[s] up the spiral stairway into his brain" (*O*, 7), recalling the "steep spiral [. . . of a] ruined staircase" that Rachel ascends when she practices piano (*VO*, 291). Orlando's desire for aloneness intersects with their love of nature. At the beginning of the novel, after Woolf tells us that "Orlando naturally loved solitary places, vast views, and to feel himself for ever and ever and ever alone" (*O*, 8), she introduces us to a symbol that represents Orlando's existential quest: the oak tree. To Orlando, the "hard root of the oak tree" represents the "earth's spine," to "which he could attach his floating heart" (9). Here Woolf describes Orlando's affinity for the oak tree using the same language that she employed when articulating the solid patriarchal world that confined and crushed Rachel in *The Voyage Out*. Indeed, only a paragraph before, Orlando stands atop the hill that the tree is on and neutrally observes patriarchal-militaristic sights that deface the natural landscape: "armadas with puffs of smoke," "forts on the coast," and "castles among the meadows"; he gazes, too, at the "spires of London and the smoke of the city," and fondly recognizes the homes and land that belongs to his family. However, Woolf's characterization of Orlando's "floating heart" indicates that their spirit maintains a liminal quality which requires the solidity of the landscape to ground it.

Orlando's reliance on the landscape in the above scene reveals his transcendent spirit, but also illustrates the difficulty of escaping into true "nature" and finding a space untouched by the ravages of civilization. Woolf ironically describes "a love of Nature"—which is "inborn" in

Orlando—as "the English disease" (99). She satirizes the traditional Romantic spirit and the convention of the picturesque here, referencing nature with a capital "N" that supposes reverence for an uncontainable force. Yet nowhere in England does Orlando access the potential of nature as in the mountainous regions of Turkey, when she lives with the band of gypsies. In the mountainsides of Turkey, Orlando "fell into [nature's] hands as she had never done before." The modernist sublime that Woolf creates in her novel finds particular—and somewhat problematic—expression in the landscapes of the Eastern world, where Orlando transitions in gender and, temporarily, class. Woolf's modernist sublime still exists in the English landscape, but there is a dramatic contrast between her experiences with nature at home and abroad, which indicates a disenchantment with Great Britain's industrialized, militarized imperial project and implies a threat to the spiritual-existential freedom of its citizens.

In one scene, Orlando climbs upon a mountaintop and gazes down at the sights in a manner that echoes her climb up the (comparatively diminutive) English hilltop. But she does not find the castles, ships, and smoke that scarred the English landscape; instead she discovers nature unadulterated. While the sights she views from the English hill instill a reassuring sense of familial and national identification in Orlando, those of the Turkish mountaintop permanently revise her perspective: "Everything, in fact, was something else" (100). Orlando experiences an intense moment of being: "her soul expanded with her eyeballs" and she "cr[ies] out in ecstasy at the goodness, the beauty of nature." Orlando's cry of ecstasy responds to the "red hyacinth" and "purple iris" that she finds on the mountaintop, which importantly connects this moment of being to the semiotics of sensuality and homoeroticism that flowers represent in Woolf's work. It is important to pause here and understand the ways in which Woolf's modernist sublime relies on landscapes outside of England, often to the point of exoticizing lands outside of the Western world.

In *Orlando,* Woolf employs Orientalist tropes of the East as an Othered space that can provide relief and renewed energy to the failing project of Western civilization. As Berman and other critics have noted, Woolf very clearly "participates in a British tradition that deploys Turkey as the exotic border between East and West, the site of desire and possibility" (218). On one hand, Woolf's artistic-political vision depends upon the occupation of in-between spaces and fringes of society, which become charged sites of potentiality, and Turkey's geographical placement lends itself well to the liminal project of *Orlando*. Yet Woolf's fiction undoubtedly contributes to modernism's tendency towards a "primitivist curiosity that was often erotic and sometimes exploitative" ("The Empire is Written," 3). We cannot overlook the ways in which Woolf appropriates both colonized spaces and the Eastern world.

With a symbology of yearning established through the landscape, Woolf intertwines nature and Orlando's literary work to emphasize the existential dimensions of Orlando's relationship to the landscapes. At the beginning of the novel, Woolf tells us that Orlando "was describing, as all young poets are forever describing, nature," thereby introducing the central subject of Orlando's artistic obsession (*O,* 7). Orlando perceives "a natural antipathy" between nature and literature; he tries to describe a laurel bush as he's writing, but must stop himself because he feels that "green in nature is one thing, green in literature another" (8). This notion of a divide between the colors found in nature and those expressed in literature propels Orlando's artistic quest to fuse the two—an endeavor that Orlando contends with off and on for the duration of the novel's three-hundred-year time span, as they write a poem.

Woolf also embeds these connections between nature and the artistic-existential in the image of Orlando's oak tree, which she later uses to title the only poem they produce: "The Oak Tree." Woolf ties these two symbols together even more explicitly with Orlando returning to the

oak tree at the end of the novel only so she may bury her poem at the roots of the tree. The tree, the eponymous poem, and Orlando's pilgrimage back to the tree all reflect questions of identity that Woolf explores through the novel. Woolf oscillates between two opposing conceptions of identity in the novel, which I define as a bifurcation that runs along the fault lines of private and public identity. The private identity expresses a personal sense of self that is unchangeable; the public identity is a performative attempt to fit oneself within the context of a communal society, its fluctuating zeitgeist and conventions. I explore these terms more in section III, but for the purposes of this discussion, these definitions should suffice. The oak tree itself represents that fixed quality of the private, psychic self. The tree is rooted in the same spot on the hillside for three hundred years, and Orlando knows they can dependably return to find the tree there again, with "the bones of the tree running out like ribs from a spine" as they did three centuries ago (231). But "The Oak Tree" poem changes through the centuries as Orlando revises it continually. Orlando's desire to bury the poem by the physical oak tree signifies an attempt to merge the two identities. But "the earth was so shallow over the roots that it seemed doubtful if she could do as she meant and bury the book," and in the end "she let her book lie unburied" (231–2). Woolf implies that even in her present time (the narrative ends in 1928, the same year that the novel was published), English society had not achieved a civic atmosphere where citizens could freely express their private identities as public ones, too.

Still, the pilgrimage to the tree suggests a definitive progress, which Woolf illustrates through juxtaposition with Orlando's first climb up the same hill, and her experience on the mountaintop in Turkey. The contrast is somewhat cyclical, since Orlando returns to the same hill at the end of the story; but it is also different because Orlando's experience is irrevocably altered by the change in perspective that occurs on the Turkish mountaintop, where everything became

something else. As she climbs the English hilltop where her oak tree stands, all that she perceives is different:

> The ferny path up the hill along which she was walking became not entirely a path, but partly the Serpentine; the hawthorn bushes were partly ladies and gentlemen sitting with card-cases and gold-mounted canes; the sheep were partly tall Mayfair houses; everything was partly something else, as if her mind had become a forest with glades branching here and there; things came nearer, and further, and mingled and separated and made the strangest alliances and combinations in an incessant chequer of light and shade. (231)

In this passage, Woolf uses her symbology to draw the reader's attention to this moment as important to Orlando, whose mind morphs into "a forest with glades branching here and there." Everything Orlando sees takes on an abstract quality that invokes the surrealism of Rachel's aquatic fantasies during her sleep and fever states. Orlando's changed perspective on the same pilgrimage to the oak tree illustrates that though she has not succeeded in merging her private and public self, the potential for progress is there.

II. Orlando's True Form: Locating Private and Public Identity

Identity in *Orlando* is as slippery as genre. Though gender, sex, and sexuality are the most sensational subjects of the novel, Woolf focuses on many dimensions of Orlando's identity. Their lineage is a "mixture of brown earth and blue blood," allowing Orlando a social mobility which facilitates their interaction with prostitutes and gypsies as well as royalty and diplomats (*O*, 16). Orlando's identity changes along the spectrums of sex, gender, sexuality, nationality, and class, whether literally or through their associations with those around them. These interweaving liminal identities emphasize the way in which these elements of selfhood interact—not coincidentally or arbitrarily, but critically—to form a sense of self that operates as private and public.

Orlando opens with an unequivocal assertion of the eponymous hero's sex/gender. I treat the two synonymously here to highlight the ways in which the novel conflates the two initially, only to complicate and deconstruct this idea later on. "He—for there could be no doubt of his sex," our biographer-narrator proclaims, "was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters" (5). In the novel's first sentence, and indeed, through the first paragraph entire, Woolf assaults us with robust masculine-coded actions and descriptors. She likens the Moor's head to an "old football," imbuing the scene with a whimsical and sporty boyishness that contrasts sardonically with Orlando's violent treatment of this human relic of imperial conquest. The opening sentences fixate on gender as the object of certainty and attention, but Woolf treats Orlando's sex/gender as inseparable from empire and race. She binds the idea of maleness to specific signifiers of imperialism and inheritance. She also establishes Orlando within a specific patriarchal-imperial lineage whose legacy reaches far into the past, and will continue far into the future: "Orlando's fathers had ridden in fields of asphodel, and stony fields, and fields watered by

strange rivers, and they had struck many heads of many colours off many shoulders. [. . .] So too would Orlando, he vowed." In this opening paragraph, the images of masculinity that assure us of Orlando's maleness cannot be separated from a propensity for aggressive conquest and subjugation built into his paternal English family history.

As a continuation of this line of strong masculine progenitors, Orlando's worldview is colored according to the history he inherits. "His fathers had been noble since they had been at all," so Orlando follows in their footsteps: when the skull "bump[s] on the floor," he strings it back up "with some chivalry" (6). Woolf asks us to examine the ways in which the hegemonic structures we inherit impact our worldview: "Were not the bars of darkness in the room, and the yellow pools which chequered the floor, made by the sun falling through the stained glass of a vast coat of arms in the window?" This idea brings us to Madeline M. Hummel's essay, which—as I explain more in the next section—articulates the existence of a biased narratorial voice in *Three Guineas*, whose subjective experiences under patriarchy cannot be entirely erased, even as the narrator attempts to detail the common woman's experience from a purely disinterested historical perspective. Similarly, Orlando's subjectivity changes dramatically when she becomes a woman and returns to England. "The bones of her ancestors, Sir Miles, Sir Gervase, and the rest, had lost something of their sanctity since Rustum el Sadi had waved his hand that night in the Asian mountains," Woolf observes (123). Orlando's social identity is no longer a privileged one in the society she has returned to; her wealth and titles have been stripped away. The sense of legacy that she carried in her breast because of these accumulations of property and status—which she is only entitled to as a man—dissipates.

But more than that, Orlando's experience in another country has altered and displaced their sense of national identity. Because Woolf intertwines Orlando's identity as a male nobleman with

a family history that explicitly links to the British Empire's colonialist enterprise, Orlando's geographical dislocation is therefore paramount to their identity transformation. Woolf specifically critiques the oppressive patriarchal constructs built into the British Empire, but she also demonstrates the broader relationship between self and nation. In the words of Jessica Berman, Orlando becomes a transnational subject—liminal in national identity and therefore free to explore the connections between concepts like identity and society. As Berman conceives it, the transnational perspective "decenter[s] the 'national tradition' as an object of inquiry" and instead emphasizes relationality, or the in-between space of identity, as expressed through the prefix "trans–" (220). Though Orlando tries to think of the skeletons of her noble English ancestors, instead she begins to wonder about "the Egyptian pyramids and what bones lie beneath them" (*O*, 123). Orlando's perspective moves beyond the nation of Great Britain, and their worldview can no longer remain confined to their domestic country.

Though this transnationality offers the potential for a globalist awareness in Woolf's novel, Berman's idea should not be confused with a globalist perspective. Transnationality does not imply softened or dissipated national borders, but rather the possibility of an individual existing on the fringes of those boundaries. In this way, Berman's transnationality depends upon "categorical crossings, leakages, and slips" as tools that arise from the term's in-between relationality (Stryker, Currah, and Moore, qtd. in Berman, 220). These liminal instruments carry a capacity to "disrupt or unsettle the conventional boundaries" of public identities. The disruptive nature of Orlando's liminality lends the narrative a radical potentiality for political and cultural critique.

In addition to unearthing the limitations of national identity and the ways in which nationhood restrictively enforces bodily identity of its citizens,[60] *Orlando*'s project of transience

[60] Berman's essay offers an in-depth analysis on the concurrent rise of the binary gender model and the modern-day nation-state, including the ways in which the ideal civic identity has been fabricated to oppose and separate a

also expresses a relationship between self and nation through the constructed idea of public identity. In *Orlando*, Woolf grapples with identity as a quantity that is both learned and intrinsic, both fixed and changeable. She attempts to define the border that separates the two, but often finds that these dimensions of identity collide. Other critics have observed this as well: Lisa Haines-Wright and Traci Lynn Kyle describe *Orlando* as Woolf's endeavor to "re-define identity as mobile, mutable, and nonetheless *self-constant*: not the *same* from moment to moment (or age to age), but continuous" (179, emphasis in original); Jane Goldman writes similarly that "Woolf explores in Orlando how different contexts, including spatial as well as temporal contexts, require different selves" (68). These critics articulate a bifurcation of identity in Woolf's work that is at once dependent on external forces and an independent interiority of the soul. I want to distinguish these ideas as public (civic) and private (psychic) identity, respectively. In the following pages, I delve deeper into these different dimensions of identity, and examine Woolf's understandings of society as they relate to these concepts.

Woolf considers the "mysterious composition" of society in frequent narratorial tangents (*O*, 138). As the novel progresses, Woolf increasingly attributes Orlando's sometimes inexplicable actions to "the spirit of the age" (174), but struggles to define that capricious zeitgeist. Once Orlando returns to England as a woman, she begins dutifully accepting invitations to and attending dinners, assemblies, and other well-to-do social rituals. But every evening before she falls asleep, she cannot help "pitching and tossing, laughing and sighing" as she thinks about these events. The narrator searches for an answer to Orlando's excitable hysterics: "And what was all this stir about? Society. And what had society said or done to throw a reasonable lady into such an excitement? In plain language, nothing." Woolf underscores the absence of meaning that characterizes the

country's citizens from "infiltrators, enemies, and undesirables," as well as "to enforce colonial relationships and hierarchies of race" (226).

social decorum and lifestyles of the English upper class, and points out an absurd lack of substance that its members contribute: “Lord O. had been gallant. Lord A. polite. The Marquis of C. charming. Mr. M. amusing,” Orlando goes over the qualities of each attending individual. “But when she tried to recollect in what their gallantry, politeness, charm, or wit had consisted, she was bound to suppose her memory at fault, for she could not name a thing.” These appraisals of the elite lead Woolf to conclude, “Society is everything and society is nothing” (137).

Though Woolf specifically refers here to the high society of London socialites and politicians, we can also interpret this statement as reflective of civil society as a whole. This paradox reveals a conception of civil society as a necessary imposition of order that undergirds human civilization—but also as a construction entirely false in our assumptions of its rigidity. “The most powerful concoction in the world,” society is also a form of organization created by man, for man. Its rules and strictures, though apparently ingrained into our lives, were not always there. When Woolf writes oppositionally that “society has no existence whatsoever,” she means that the oftentimes nonsensical modes of social organization we buy into—gender roles, for example—are malleable ideas, made rigid only by hegemonic systems for the purpose of creating stratified hierarchies. By defining society and the power structures that shape it around performative ideals based less on substance than appearance, Woolf paves the way for her bifurcation of identity.

But this dichotomy is something that she struggles with. After Orlando’s sex transformation, once Woolf assures us plainly that “there is no denying” Orlando’s altered appearance, she shows us that Orlando’s identity beneath this exterior remains unchanged (96). “In every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been,” Woolf writes, adding that “though it altered their future, [the change of sex] did nothing whatever to alter their identity.”

Here, Woolf articulates a conception of identity divided according to a public and private self. The identity of sex (to be distinguished from gender), for instance, constitutes part of the public self—it affects an individual's possible interactions with the society that they live in. In *The Voyage Out*, Rachel's identity as a female in Victorian society limits her participation to that of the domestic sphere. However, this identity does not, Woolf seems to argue, impact our private sense of identity—an understanding of our interior being that exists beneath our obligations to exterior life.

And yet, not much later in the novel, Woolf apparently reverses this course of thought. She transcribes a litany of changes that deeply alter Orlando's behavior and personality—"her modesty as to her writing, her vanity as to her person, her fears for her safety"—then concludes that each of these "seems to hint that what was said a short time ago about there being no change in Orlando the man and Orlando the woman, was ceasing altogether to be true" (132). Though the mercurial, unreliable narration functions as part of Woolf's manipulation of formal strategies—which I discuss in the next section—the narrator's uncertainty also reveals the ways in which the expectation of upholding a civic identity impacts one's psychic sense of self, too.

To better understand the relationship between private and public identity, I want to return to and examine the emerging distinction between sex and gender as *Orlando* progresses.[61] By creating androgynous characters whose clothing does not readily betray their sexes, Woolf humorously probes the ways gender performativity[62] functions as a categorization tool for sex, which critically organizes the hierarchy and structure of patriarchal society. In one scene, Woolf

[61] To be clear, I believe Woolf intuitively understood this distinction but perhaps lacked the full vocabulary to articulate it as we in the twenty-first century can.

[62] Prominent gender theorist Judith Butler talks about the performativity of gender roles in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Using drag as a grounding example, Butler hypothesizes three contingent dimensions of corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. Where my analysis of *Orlando* posits a dichotomy, Butler's theory further distinguishes between two different modes of gender expression within an individual. "If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performance," Butler writes of drag racing, "then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance" (187).

writes that the Archduchess and Orlando "acted the parts of man and woman for ten minutes with great vigour and then fell into natural discourse," implying that gender serves as a dramatization for sex (126). Clothing best articulates this idea. Orlando's first love wears a "loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex," and the narrator spends a page "ready to tear his hair with vexation" along with Orlando, as they try to pinpoint the Russian stranger's sex based on their gender presentation (22). Again, Woolf writes of the Eastern world as an exotic place where androgyny is not only possible, but natural and commonplace. Once Orlando begins experimenting with raiment, they gravitate towards Eastern clothing and wear items like "those Turkish coats and trousers which can be worn indifferently by either sex" (97), or "a China robe of ambiguous gender" (156).

Orlando's preference for androgynous Oriental garb also serves to contrast the constraining nature of masculine and feminine clothing, which imposes behavioral restrictions upon the wearer. When Orlando is a woman, she realizes that "'skirts are plaguey things to have about one's heels,'" as they keep one from self-sufficient actions. Onboard a ship at the time of her musings, Orlando realizes that the skirts would keep her from leaping overboard and swimming in the event of an emergency, which means that she "should have to trust to the protection of a blue-jacket" (108). Beyond decorative comportment, Woolf argues that demands of appearance profoundly constrain an individual's behavioral tendencies and possibilities.

Sex and gender serve as examples of private identity and public identity, respectively. The latter requires external performativity, dutiful in its attempts to adhere to the requirements of social decorum and hierarchy. In *Orlando*, Woolf places greater emphasis on the strict demands of performing traditional femininity. Pointing out that women "can only attain these graces, without which they may enjoy none of the delights of life, by the most tedious discipline" (110), Woolf

implies that a woman's ability to embody the feminine—for example, through the "Angel of the House," what Woolf called the Victorian "ideal of womanhood"[63] (*Pargiters*, xxx)—determines the social power she may enjoy in a society that denies her any real political power. Indeed, after Orlando becomes a woman, she begins to see through the charades of femininity, performed in service to men: "Yet, having been so lately a woman herself, she suspected that the girl's timidity and her hesitating answers and the very fumbling with the key in the latch and the fold of her cloak and the droop of her wrist were all put on to gratify her masculinity" (153).[64] Woolf's articulation of this performative element implicates gender roles as part of an act that is both conscious and unconscious—but always tailored to contemporary society's expectations, and fundamentally intertwined with the power structures that shape our lives.

By exposing the performativity of gender roles and their importance to power dynamics in social hierarchies, Woolf argues that gender roles and other displays of public identity exist for the express purpose of servicing the dominant culture of a society. Woolf thereby opposes patriarchal hegemony's claims that gender roles are simply an expression of the natural biological order of things. Instead, she reveals the ways in which dominant classes in society manipulate private dimensions of identity for their own political advantages. As she examines the schizophrenic bifurcation of identity born of hegemonic societies, Woolf invites us to critically consider the relations between self and society. Beyond that, she dares readers to renounce their public identity as much as possible, to merge the civic and psychic identities in an act of sociopolitical defiance.

[63] Woolf calls her "a dream, a phantom [. . .] a kind of mirage" with "an ideal existence, a fictitious existence" (xxx).
[64] The woman that approaches Orlando in this scene initially mistakes Orlando for a man. Sex-identification blunders occur frequently in *Orlando*, as do spontaneous sex changes (Archduchess Harriet's transformation to Archduke Harry, for example).

III. "A state of incognito(a)": Between Literary Worlds and Histories

Just as the narrative subversions of the sitting-room and coming-of-age genres in *The Voyage Out* lay bare the heteronormative structures and repressive gender roles that bifurcate society, so, too, do Woolf's experimentations with storytelling in *Orlando* provide a critique of literary and social expectations. By manipulating narratorial voices and invoking fantastical plot devices, Woolf undermines an established literary form and in doing so, calls into question the underlining patriarchal hegemony that privileges certain modes of expression over others. With the pseudo-biographical form, Woolf satirizes a stiff and self-important genre cherished by Victorians for its endorsement of a linear, heteronormative life trajectory.

But this absurdist satire, though penned as Woolf was in between more serious projects, still masks a serious and earnest exploration of ideas about identity—and queer, gender-nonconforming identity in particular—that one could scarcely express in the intensely homophobic atmosphere of late-1920s Great Britain. Intolerance of lesbianism in particular was growing; though not legally recognized in early twentieth century Britain, men were unsettled enough by the undercurrent of lesbian activity that in 1921, a proposal to extend the 1885 Labouchère Amendment to women was brought forth to the House of Commons (Parkes 434). Adam Parkes illustrates the contentious grounds of publishing around this period through his comparison of *Orlando: A Biography* and Radclyffe Hall's novel, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). Published the same year as Woolf's novel, *The Well of Loneliness* was promptly whisked to an obscenity trial by censorious opponents, and eventually fell out of public favor.[65] *Orlando*, by contrast,

[65] The novel would later become a foundational cornerstone to LGBT communities of writers and readers alike, but in Woolf's time, the trial temporarily stunted popular interest in the novel.

immediately rose in ranks to become a best seller.

In such a conservative, anti-lesbian atmosphere, how did Woolf's novel escape legal censure? Parkes suggests this disparity in public reception depends upon the different presentations of this taboo subject matter. "Whereas *Well* presents lesbianism as an issue for the debating chamber," Parkes writes, "*Orlando* propels its readers into the realm of imagination, a region of seeming fantasy" (436). Primed into a false sense of innocuous intentions by the social satires of Jane Austen—whose novels, though incendiary in humor, in practice did little to actually upend the status quo—contemporary readers would not consider the nonconformist ideas explored in *Orlando* a serious threat. *Orlando*'s absurd elements of fantasy elevate the narrative above the burdened and divisive polemic that weighted Hall's novel. To be sure, *Orlando* still presents a powerful and subversive critique of the British Empire, and the effects of too-strong nationalism on identity. But, as Parkes notes, Woolf's experimentation with genre led her to "[transform] reality, and history, into a theater of seemingly infinite protean possibility which prompts another series of questions: What is gender? What is sexuality? What is the difference between normality and deviance?" All this, bundled up in the whimsicality of satire and fantasy.

While the parodic tones of Woolf's novel alone invoke the biographical genre without necessarily inspiring a social critique, the narrative's fantastical elements function antithetically to this Victorian genre, pulling apart its formal structure to implant a backdoor critique of the society within which the biography would typically be celebrated. The novel's atemporality disrupts the biography's usual format that generally follows a bildungsroman-like narrative. Melanie Micir's essay "The Queer Timing of *Orlando: A Biography*," which discusses chronological form in *Orlando* relative to contemporary theories of queer temporality, identifies the literary genre of biography as "the gatekeeper *par excellence* of reproductive time" (11). Micir posits that the

conventional chronology and form inherent to Victorian biographies exact a "normativizing pull" on readers, encouraging a life trajectory that replicates heterosexual paradigms. J. Halberstam terms this typical sequence as "adolescence-early adulthood-marriage-reproduction-child rearing-retirement-death" (qtd. in Micir, 12). Orlando's liminality in terms of identity, temporality, and even trans-spatial nationality refuses the conventions of the national-historical coming-of-age narrative. This unpredictable transience upends any semblance of a biography reliant on chronological coherence as the mode of summarizing a life. In this way, the pseudo-biographical form presented in *Orlando* rejects the authoritative control of a reputable literary genre, and undermines the hegemonic, masculine modes of apprehending the world.

Magical plot devices also confuse the biographical form's attempts to create a linear, bite-sized narrative. Woolf relies upon absurd elements borrowed from fables to fracture the narrative into two competing parts: the respectable, fact-driven biography, and the novel that spills over and defies categorization. The trance-like sleep states that punctuate the novel operate as fantastical devices which propel the narrative deeper into a fairy-tale world that is unfathomable to the biographer-narrator. Because the Victorian biographer clings as he does to the "facts," the fantastical elements of the story require a second narrator to describe them. The story thus oscillates between what J. J. Wilson calls the "false father-figure" biographer, who insists on a stuffy adherence to facts as the only guiding light to truth, and Woolf herself, whose existentially probing, open-ended tangents transform *Orlando* into the hybrid novel that it is (176). The bifurcation of narrator that I propose can be understood in two different ways. The first: we could read the narrative split as reflective of two separate narrators attempting to tell the same story but diverging in form and style. This reading assumes that Woolf intentionally separates herself from the biographer-narrator. Or, the second: two voices reside within one narrator. In this case, Woolf

begins with a single narrator—the traditional biographer—whose strict "objective" tone and preoccupation with facts assume the shape of conventional biographical modes. But the biographer-narrator's intentions are thwarted as Woolf infuses his narration with the inquisitive, overtly subjective voice of a novelist-narrator. Jeanette Beebe explores the tensions between the biographer and novelist in her essay "A Wild Goose Chase: Humoring the Narrator in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*," and proposes that the biographer reads as a character himself—one who insists profusely on his status as a historian, but whose storytelling is just that: a fiction. However we choose to read the division between Woolf and the biographer matters less than the effect this unreliable narratorial device engenders. Woolf's revision of the traditional historian voice, which sustains the Victorian biography, attempts a criticism of the form's unwavering solidity and impartialness.

Let us now examine the elements of fantasy that enable our perception of the biographer-narrator as separate, or different from, the novelist-narrator. When confronted with Orlando's spells of altered consciousness—which echo Rachel Vinrace's powerful and transformative dream states—the biographer-narrator reaches an inaccessible point in the narrative, which the novelist-narrator then commands. As the staunch procession of facts stumbles and the biographer-narrator finds himself on shifting territory, he switches to a confessional tone as he tries to relate a "dark, mysterious, and undocumented" incident in Orlando's life. "The biographer is now faced with a difficulty which it is better perhaps to confess than to gloss over," we are told by our guide, who refers to himself in the third person out of a duty towards objectivity:

> Up to this point in telling the story of Orlando's life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfil the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write finis on the tombstone above our heads. But now we come to an episode which lies right across our path, so that there is no ignoring it. Yet it is dark,

> mysterious, and undocumented; so that there is no explaining it. Volumes might be written in interpretation of it; whole religious systems founded upon the signification of it. Our simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may. (43)

Bound to "the facts as far as they are known," the biographer-narrator can do no more than acknowledge this event in Orlando's life. It is Woolf (or the novelist-narrator—I use the two interchangeably from here) who seizes the opportunity for contemplation; she asks, "But if sleep it was, of what nature, we can scarcely refrain from asking, are such sleeps as these?" (45). She allows these wandering thoughts to ramble for another paragraph: "Had Orlando, worn out by the extremity of his suffering, died for a week, and then come back to life again? And if so, of what nature is death and of what nature life?" By interjecting where the biographer-narrator would not typically speak, Woolf reveals the subjective and limited perspective of a form that claims objectivity, thereby undermining its authority. Woolf's novel delegitimizes the Victorian biography's crowning spot in a hierarchy that prioritizes forms of history and truth.

Through these open-ended probes, Woolf also encourages a dialogue between reader and text, inviting the reader to speculate deeper. Her digressions embolden the reader to form conclusions of their own about the narrative, instead of relying upon the "expertise" of the biographer-narrator to assert an unerring, unshakeable meaning. As we'll see, Woolf employs this strategy in *Three Guineas*, too. As *Orlando*'s narrative progresses, we see Woolf increasingly collapsing the reader's expectation of finding a tidy truth at every corner. In one scene, Woolf blatantly declares that "the truth does not exist. Nothing exists. The whole thing is a miasma—a mirage" (136). Karyn Z. Sproles has similarly noted that these asides from the novelist-narrator "throw the narrative open to interpretation and undermine any attempt to establish a single truth by making a joke of the biological demand for accuracy" (191). Such permission to wonder topples

the hierarchy of the biographical/historical form and removes power from the biographer[66] as the gatekeeper of knowledge.

Moreover, the back and forth between the two narrative perspectives negates the concept of objective truth. This dynamic finds similar life in the multiple voices of *Three Guineas*, which utilizes the epistolary form[67] to make its argument. Madeline Hummel's essay presents a reading of *Three Guineas* in which two voices coincide: the historical voice that "retrospectively reports the history of the common woman in her quest for a proper educational system and adequate financial security"; and the biased voice that recognizes her position "in a world ruled by a common man" and thus cannot help but vocalize her subjectivity (153). These two voices parallel *Orlando*'s objective biographer-narrator and subjective novelist-narrator. Hummel observes that "the fictional dialogue between the biased 'I' and the historical 'I' evokes a constant cycle in which it becomes clear that the notion of objective history is impossible." Men and women have been "so differently influenced by memory and tradition"; "though [women] see the same world, [they] see it through different eyes" (*TG*, 22). In the epilogue, I further examine Woolf's manipulation of this formal strategy.

Woolf's liberation of knowledge from the clutches of the biographer's rigid desire for objectivity allows Orlando's story to move forward. For the narrative to continue, we must not listen to the original biographer-narrator who cannot grasp crucial moments that are masked by sheer mysticism and absurdity, but to the novelist-narrator. Another seven-day slumber overcomes Orlando shortly after the initial trance, and this comatose state of consciousness transforms the

[66] The word "biographer" could easily be substituted with other similar gatekeepers: scholars and academics, historians, etc. Woolf wants to remove the barriers that have kept women and other oppressed groups in the margins of culture and history, and stripping officially titled men of their unwavering authority moves a step in this direction.
[67] There are three letters, divided into three chapters according to the three guineas that Woolf centers her discussion around. But in reality, the essay nestles letters within letters—meaning that the perspectives and voices within are many.

entire narrative: it is when Orlando the man becomes Orlando the woman. The details of the narrative blur and muddy; "the firm, if rather narrow, ground of ascertained truth" devolves into a path unrecognizable and untraversable by our traditional biographer (*O*, 91). "Nobody has ever known exactly what took place later that night," Woolf intones mysteriously, allowing the biography to surrender to a patchwork truth, pieced together through the collective accounts of "some say" and "others maintain." After Orlando's gender transformation, the narrative is characterized more frequently by moments like these—ones which are inaccessible to narrator and reader alike. But the rise in obscurity surrounding Orlando's story does not originate from a proliferation of these same fantastical elements. Instead, Woolf fills Orlando's story with more omissions and parenthetical statements in order to represent the different ways men's and women's biographies and lives are treated.

By altering the formal strategies that define Orlando's biography according to their changing gender, Woolf guides us towards one of the major arguments she propounds in *Three Guineas*, where she fixates on women's forced absence from the public sphere and articulates this problem through their lack of representation in "official" history and popular biography. "The picture of the lives of others" as expressed through biography, autobiography, and the daily newspaper—what Woolf terms "history in the raw"—form the foundations of Woolf's central assertion that links transnational patriarchy with the rise of fascism in Europe around that time (9). But she employs the historical and biographical information of women in a different manner, by underscoring the ways in which these women have been buried by a society of male supremacy. Like the well-to-do Englishwomen in *Three Guineas* who have no biographies that Woolf can "yet drawn upon [. . .] to supply us with a picture of [their] lives and minds" (*TG*, 20), Orlando "often occurs in contemporary memoirs" only in relation to her male cousin (*O*, 155). This male relative

receives all credit which is due in fact to Orlando: “her bounty is ascribed to him, and it is he who is said to have written the poems that were really hers.” The transformations in Orlando’s life and legacy that accompany their sex change expresses an experiential gulf between men and women that, as we’ll see, Woolf resurrects through the formal strategies and arguments presented in *Three Guineas*.

Epilogue

Though I have spent much of this thesis articulating the ways that Woolf crafts her modernist sublime through natural landscapes in order to fuse her politics with existential concerns, Woolf's descriptions of London importantly communicate an aspect of the materialist critique Woolf propounds in *Three Guineas* (1938). The English capital city that Woolf conceives of is founded upon certain emblematic buildings that serve as symbolic representations of England's ruling institutions. *Orlando: A Biography* is stamped by the iconic image of St. Paul's Church, for example, and Woolf even underscores the Church's role in upholding the structures of imperialism. Woolf describes a rapidly sinking, blood-red sun that is "slung like an orange on the cross of St. Paul's" (32), pairing a foreshadowing negation of the nationalist aphorism "the sun never sets on the British Empire" with the institutional symbol of Christianity. Though *The Voyage Out* does not carry the same return to the silhouette of London, the passengers of the *Euphrosyne* and the guests at the Santa Marina hotel nostalgically reference Westminster Abbey and other details from their homeland. The skyline of London in Woolf's fiction carries certain implications about where we can locate the nation's concentrations of power.

But Woolf does not explicitly connect these institutions to patriarchal hegemony until *Three Guineas*, where the repeated images of "the spires and domes of the city churches, the smooth bulk of [London's] banks, the opulent and ample curves of its halls and meeting-places" are resurrected and connected to the oppressions committed by an imperial-patriarchal state that accumulates power and distributes its resources almost exclusively to wealthy men (*O,* 157). When the educated man's daughter steps out of the private house and onto the connecting bridge to the "world of professional, of public life," she appraises London according to the institutions that

populate it: “Within quite a small space are crowded together St Paul’s, the Bank of England, the Mansion House, the massive if funereal battlements of the Law Courts; and on the other side, Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament” (*TG*, 23). Here, the footprints of fathers and brothers indelibly mark the paths that connect these buildings. Woolf appraises the city as a history book of systemic male supremacy, one which details the “hundreds of years [men] have been mounting those steps, passing in and out of those doors, ascending those pulpits, preaching money-making, administering justice.” With her work in *Three Guineas*, Woolf infiltrates and dismantles the systems of patriarchal authority one institution at a time. The formal structure that presents Woolf’s materialist critique in this pacifist-feminist essay demonstrates a culmination of the textual strategies and experimentations with genre that I have examined in this thesis.

A persistent attempt to challenge our understanding of the fact/fiction bifurcation emerges in Woolf’s fiction. The world of strict rationality and “facts” is often associated with the solidity of a masculine worldview, while the imaginative realm of fiction assumes an antithetical position. We’ve seen this idea in *The Voyage Out*—with Rachel’s attraction to the modern books that dispute facts, for example. Woolf’s emphasis on this intellectual bifurcation calls attention to literature’s capacity as a weapon of political dissidence.

Nowhere does this idea present itself more clearly than in Woolf’s only discarded project: *The Pargiters*. While Woolf originally intended to create a hybrid novel-essay, this experiment was eventually abandoned and split respectively into the historical novel *The Years* and the anti-fascist manifesto *Three Guineas*. Woolf’s work with *The Pargiters* most explicitly demonstrates the ways in which a society’s culture and knowledge reflect the patriarchal socialization and power dynamics embedded in the private and public worlds of that society. Woolf thereby reveals literature’s “passive” potential for political dissidence, and she endeavors to deconstruct the

hierarchies reproduced in fiction and its established genres. We should understand the word "passive" on Woolf's terms. As she probes for alternative modes of resistance, the notion of "absenting oneself" appears as a counterpoint to traditional progressivist ideas of protest. Concluding that "by making [women's] absence felt their presence becomes desirable," Woolf substitutes the conventional forms of activism—which, she argues, can do very little working within the same system they want to dismantle—for a negative form of resistance (*TG*, 140). Indeed, her call to form an Outsiders' Society is a self-proclaimed "passive experiment" (139). In *The Pargiters*, Woolf resists the dominant Victorian culture by demolishing the assumed dichotomy of fact and fiction. She terms *The Years* "a novel of fact"[68] and utilizes excerpts from this imagined novel, which "represent[s] English life at its most normal, most typical, and most representative" to build upon the arguments explicated in the essay sections of the experiment (9).

Woolf's dissolution of the tension between fact and fiction through genre serves to rupture a hierarchy of knowledge that privileges some lives over others. If pedagogic genres like biography, historical, and academic writing are privileged as the gatekeepers to knowledge, Woolf uses the world of fiction as an oppositional literary force to these male-controlled genres. "If you object that fiction is not history," Woolf muses, "I reply that though it would be far easier to write history [. . .] that method of telling the truth seems to me so elementary, and so clumsy, that I prefer, where truth is important, to write fiction" (9). Woolf expresses hesitation about history's ability to tell the truth because its annals are guarded by biased historians. Its facts are recorded by the winning hand, its pictures painted and stories transcribed by those on the ruling side of hegemonic societies. Within this regulated version of history, Woolf perceives culture—and literature in particular—as a less propagandistic record of history, at least to the extent that culture

[68] Woolf claims that the imagined novel is based on an aggregate ("I might boldly say thousands," she proclaims) of real-life biographies and memoirs that shape the individual stories of the Pargiter family members (9).

is not subject to censorious figures of authority in a democratic society. To be sure, a society's culture still reflects the reigning prejudices of that same society, but Woolf points out that these pressures do not close the gap that exists in literature, offering all individuals the same potential for expression.[69] With literature, "there is no head of the profession; no Lord Chancellor as in your own case: no official body with the power to lay down the rules and enforce them" (*TG* 107). Marginalized citizens cannot author a country's history or science books, since one must wield a certain position of power in society—that of a professor, for example—in order to write authoritative texts. But the marginalized cannot be barred from using pen and paper to tell their stories, to reveal their suppressed perspectives and truths.

Though Woolf abandoned her original idea of a "novel of fact," she carried the same artistic concerns into her pacifist-feminist manifesto, *Three Guineas*. In this essay, Woolf gives voice to women abandoned by the prevailing historiography through formal strategies that at once draw attention to the historical suppression of women and reject the primacy of patriarchal discursive modes. Using textual devices like ellipses and footnotes, Woolf draws parallels between women's vacancies in the annals of history and biography and their absence from England's cultural and political worlds. But Woolf moves beyond simple elegiac mourning for the women that hegemonic-enforced history fails to record; she wages an artistic-intellectual war against the economic, religious, educational, and political institutions that patriarchy has barred women from. "Those three dots mark a precipice," Woolf writes in *Three Guineas*, announcing the symbolic function of her ellipses (6). This punctuation signifies "a gulf so deeply cut between [men and

[69] Such an argument may read as especially tone-deaf in our late-capitalist era, where entire industries (e.g., publishing) have been created to sustain the arts world and where those industries are not without their hegemonic prejudices that make it difficult for people of color and working-class individuals to even get a foot in that gap. But we should remember that Woolf was writing from her time, and from the position of a queer woman who not only achieved enough success in writing to sustain her but also founded her own press.

women],” a chasm of experience that creates a gap in communication, too.

With the academic footnotes, Woolf provides glimpses into the experiences that set men and women’s lives apart in English society. Fifty-one pages of the essay are devoted to presenting the Englishwoman’s perspective through empirical data and personal accounts that Woolf meticulously collected and indexed from newspaper stories, periodicals, biographies, letters, and diaries of men and women behind the scenes. The information found in the footnotes supports some of Woolf’s most searing criticisms, fighting hypocrisy with the “white light” of irrefutable facts (56). In footnote 38 of the essay’s second section, for example, Woolf broaches the “question of chastity, both of mind and body” (196), and as she searches the words of St. Paul for an answer, her exploration rapidly transforms into an indictment of Christianity’s hypocrisy, which manipulates the “trinity of accomplices, Angels, nature, and law” to enforce sexist personal opinions (197). If this argument about the origins of chastity seems irrelevant, we need only look at the pernicious effects that the lingering “ghost of St. Paul” has had on Englishwomen: “Chastity was invoked to prevent her from studying medicine; from painting from the nude; from reading Shakespeare; from playing in orchestras; from walking down Bond Street alone,” Woolf writes (200, 199). Among the sources Woolf cites within this footnote alone include *Paxton and the Bachelor of Duke*, *The Earlier Letters of Gertrude Bell*, *Josephine Butler*, and *Candid Reminiscences*—biographies, letters, and other nonacademic sources which are not privileged with authority by the academic genre.

These “unauthorized sources,” as Jane Marcus explains, are “all notoriously excluded from the realms of academic, political, or historical factual reality” (“Introduction,” xlviii). Woolf invites us to question women’s relation to “facts,” but also the arbitrating institutions that underlie these defined realities. The footnotes of *Three Guineas* thus offer a window into an alternative

English history, comprised of the numerical facts and quotidian details that shape the buried lives of women. Together, these details build the infrastructure that supports Woolf's searing criticism of patriarchal society. Woolf demonstrates the value of quotidian details from historically "unimportant" lives, effectively countering the exclusionary, patriarchal-hegemony-enforcing principles of institutional academia.

A handful of history's forgotten women appear in the main text, too: the voice of Mary Kingsley, whose words—"being allowed to learn German was *all* the paid education I ever had"—haunt the first section of the essay (6, 30); the tale of Mary Astell, who, with Queen Anne's support, prepared to found a women's college—until the Church intervened (34); the story of Sophia Jex-Blake, who desired monetary compensation for a tutorship position, but whose father adamantly and without reason denied her financial independence (79). Woolf's decision to include some women in the main text but exclude most transforms the essay itself into a performative formal exercise. Using the footnotes as an argumentative device, Woolf places herself within the traditionally male-dominated academic genre. But her reliance on the footnotes to convey necessary pieces of evidence undercuts the genre with irony. Woolf denies the genre authority by subverting its practices, and through that sabotage, she forms a meta-structural argument about the exclusionary practices of academia and conventional historicism. These details exist in the footnotes of the essay because they reflect the ways in which patriarchal history has chosen to neglect women. In subverting the genre's form and weaponizing the patriarchal "pedantic arbiters of institutional opinion" to serve her own feminist-pacifist vision in *Three Guineas*, Woolf brutally destabilizes those same masculine forms (Hummel 156).

Like her manipulation of genre convention, Woolf's aesthetic of interruption in *Three Guineas* highlights and condemns the power structures that undergird our cultural and intellectual

discourses. The textual strategies Woolf employs serve to propel her rhetoric by ironically impeding it. In his essay "Those Dots: Suspension and Interruption in Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts*," critic Matthew Weber has argued that the dots which punctuate Woolf's radical manifesto halt the often uncritical progressivist call to action. Woolf implies that the methods of traditional activism—sign a letter of protest and send it to a newspaper, join an activist society, or otherwise subscribe to its funds—have done little to upend the injustices of the status quo because they unassumingly work within the same power structures that perpetuate wrongdoing. Instead, as Weber argues, Woolf's ellipses propel the reader into a "contemplative state of hesitation" (19). Pointing out that "the very possibility of imagining how to proceed depends dearly on the obstruction of already recognized politics, and on a refusal to loosen the obstruction," Weber thus observes a "political-aesthetic refusal" at the heart of Woolf's later work.

To better understand this concept, we may recall Woolf's vision of a "passive" activism as a counterpoint to conventional progressivist narratives of dissidence. Weber's identified "political-aesthetic refusal" contributes to the same vocabulary of negative resistance that "passivity" and "absenting oneself" belong to. In its suspension of action, the critical pauses generated by ellipses remind the reader of the ease with which women may find themselves "trapesing along at the tail end of the procession," indoctrinated into the same systemic hierarchy, only a level higher (*TG*, 74). With these strategies of interruption and suspension, Woolf thereby calls on her readers to refuse the procession and instead ask themselves: "What is this 'civilization' in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them? What are these professions and why should we make money out of them? Where in short is it leading us, the procession of the sons of educated men?" (77).

The essay's epistolary form further contributes to Woolf's interruptive dialectic. By

converging the familiar epistolary form with the rigorous academic essay, Woolf introduces a polyvocality—much like *Orlando*'s multiple narrators—that crucially informs her argument and its "satirical logic" (Hummel 155). The first-person narrator is an educated man's daughter who offers the essay as an attempted response to a letter sent over three years ago by a male lawyer who wanted to know "how in her opinion war can be prevented" (5). But this penned tête-à-tête is complicated as Woolf endeavors to answer the man's letter, and the essay devolves into a nesting doll of hypothetical epistles between the barrister and the imaginary woman whom he is asking for help. Though Woolf's polyvocal technique decentralizes the argument and gives prominence to her opponent's perspective, the strategy does not detract from Woolf's own feminist-pacifist criticism. Instead, the epistolary form exposes the hypocrisy of the patriarchy's arguments and enables Woolf's snarky tirade against centuries-old institutions of power. The decentralization of perspective is crucial, too, because it reminds us that constructions of authority—even Woolf's—are just that. In her introduction to *Three Guineas*, Jane Marcus asserts that Woolf creates authority only to "[teach] the reader how to dismantle it" (xlvi). The polyvocality of the text therefore obstructs the reader's unassuming acceptance of Woolf's argument and reminds us that all authoritative displays are façades which merit interrogation. The dialogic function built into *Three Guineas* also opposes the conventional pedagogical impulse towards paternalistic monologue. Madeline Hummel has observed this function, too; she notes that "a correspondence is like a dialogue except that the partners are separated" (154). Through the epistolary form, then, Woolf offers an alternative path of education that delegitimizes hierarchical modes of obtaining knowledge and prioritizes democratic collaboration. A discriminatory or redacted version of history does not exist in *Three Guineas*, because its form does not allow it. The essay argues that multiplicitous perspectives are necessary to combat intellectual tyranny. "There is a Grenfell point

of view," Woolf writes, "a Knebworth point of view; a Wilfred Owen point of view; a Lord Chief Justice's point of view and the point of view of an educated man's daughter. But is there no absolute point of view?" (*TG,* 13). Woolf's aggregation of perspectives, gathered from various historical figures and documents, attempts to construct a more objective and truthful narrative than what already exists in official history books.

* * *

With *The Voyage Out* and *Orlando: A Biography*, I have described the ways in which Woolf's modernist sublime aesthetically connects the political to existential concerns in her fiction. This thematic of potentiality that unifies Woolf's political-artistic philosophy also empowers Woolf's work in *Three Guineas*, with her suggestion that women and other marginalized groups band together to form an Outsiders' Society. "Since we are different, our help must be different," Woolf writes; she insists that "we can best help you to prevent war not by joining your society but by remaining outside your society but in cooperation with its aim" (*TG,* 170). The hypothetical society that Woolf devises at once reclaims the brave and disobedient spirit of Antigone and revitalizes Rachel's "Great War." Among the ranks of the Outsiders' Society, we can place Woolf's radical female protagonists, ranging from Rachel Vinrace and Orlando to Lily La Trobe, the swarthy, unapologetic lesbian character in *Between the Acts* (1941), whom "nature had somehow set [. . .] apart from her kind" (*BA*, 211). At first glance, Woolf's proposal appears somewhat vague, lacking in finality. The Outsiders' Society seems like just another "cloud that melt[s] into the other clouds on the horizon," like Miss La Trobe's artistic vision once her play has concluded (209). But I want to suggest that the open-endedness of *Three Guineas* is intentional, and articulates the same

thematic of potentiality that energizes Woolf's fiction. In Woolf's Outsiders' Society, we get a hopeful glimpse of a new horizon, and it is this sense of boundless possibility that defines her political-artistic vision and pushes towards that dream of "a unity that rubs out divisions as if they were chalk marks only" (*TG*, 169).

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